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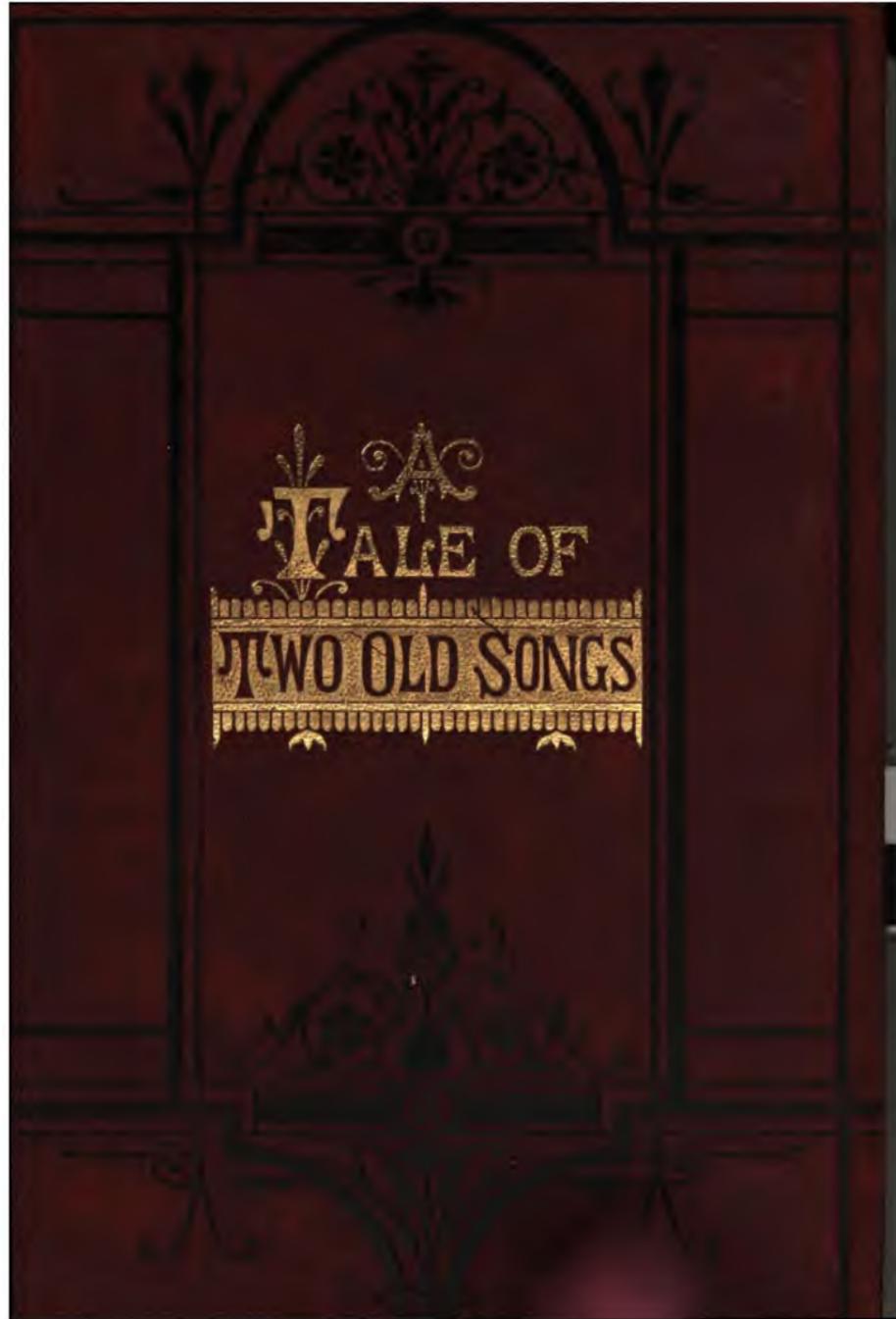
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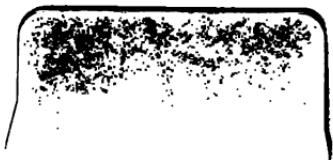
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A TALE OF
TWO OLD SONGS



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A

TALE OF TWO OLD SONGS.

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THE OLD BRIDGE.

Page 5.

A TALE OF THE FOLK OLD AND NEW.

BY THE

HON. MRS CLIFFORD-BUTLER
AUTHOR OF "A COIN IN MY CAP."

1. *THE LODGE*

2. *THE VILLAGE BLACKSMITH.*



LONDON:
JAMES NISBET & CO., 21 BERNERS STREET.

MDCCLXXVI.

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¶ TWO OLD SONGS

A TALE OF TWO OLD SONGS.

BY THE

HON. MRS CLIFFORD-BUTLER,
AUTHOR OF "A SUNBEAM'S INFLUENCE."

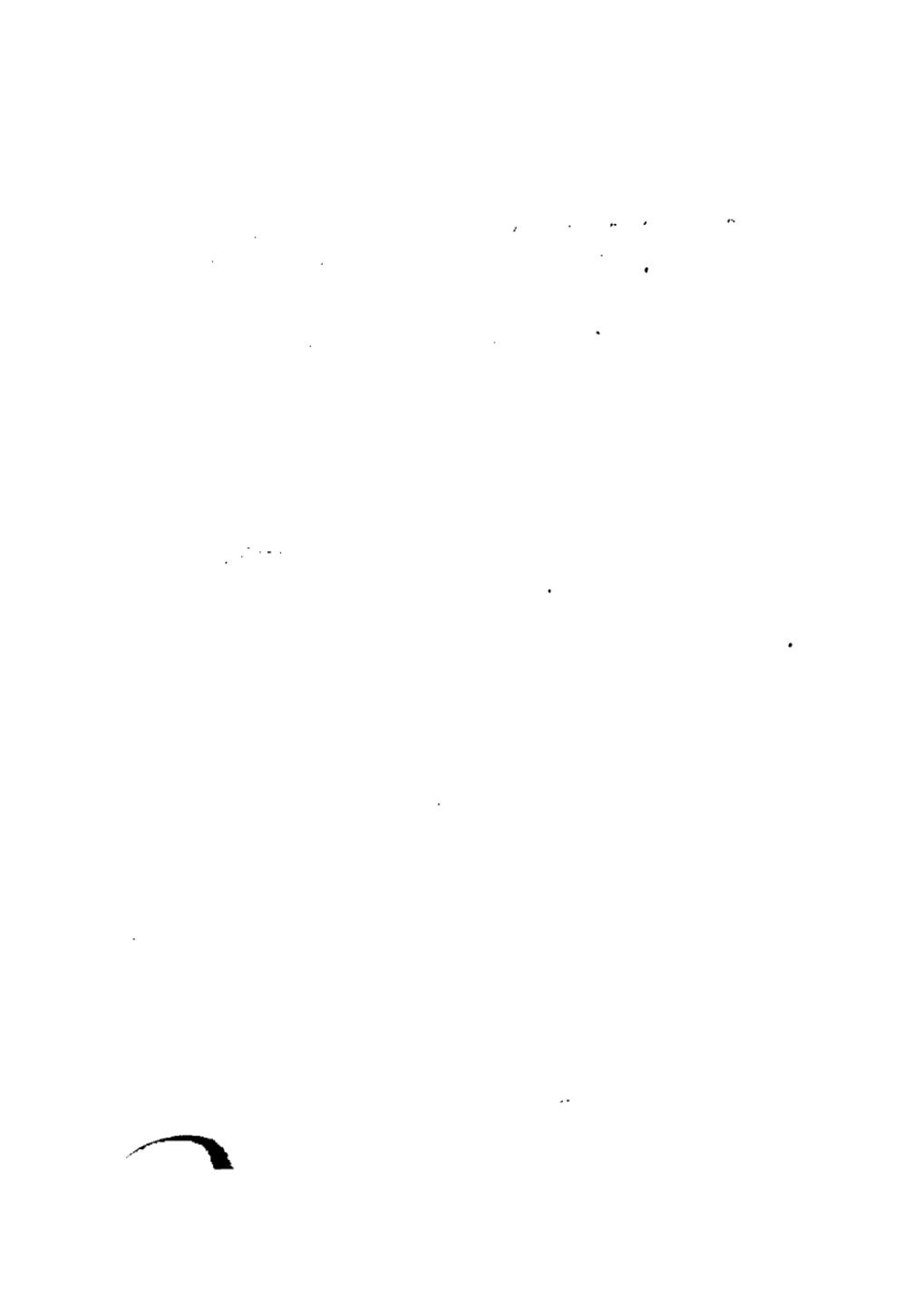
1. *THE BRIDGE.*

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250. q. 103.



THE BRIDGE.

A TALE IN THREE PARTS.



P A R T I.

“ I stood on the bridge at midnight,
As the clocks were striking the hour ;
And the moon rose o'er the city, :
Behind the dark church tower.

“ I saw her bright reflection
In the waters under me,
Like a golden goblet falling
And sinking into the sea.

“ And far in the hazy distance
Of that lovely night in June,
The blaze of the flaming furnace
Gleam'd redder than the moon.

“ Among the long black rafters
The wavering shadows lay,
And the current that came from the ocean
Seem'd to lift and bear them away:

“ As sweeping and eddying through them,
Rose the belated tide ;
And streaming into the moonlight,
The seaweed floated wide.”

THE old wooden bridge at Grayford, with
its time-blackened rafters and tall irregular supports, with the silvery flood that flows
past it in summer with calm gentle majesty, in
winter, with a fierce eddying whirling rush, that

seems to threaten its old friend with sudden annihilation ;—how many and many an old memory does it suggest !

How many voices of the past, hushed for evermore, come back and mingle with the river's never-ceasing murmur ! How many lost footsteps seem once more to tread the wooden planks, as they pass onward, each to their appointed work !

It is less frequented now, my ancient friend, for not a quarter of a mile lower down the river stands a new and massive bridge of stone, the gift to themselves of the population of the brisk and stirring town of Grayford, and it is over this that most of the inhabitants prefer to wend their busy way ; for even thirty years ago there were rumours that some of the piers of the old bridge were the worse for age, and unfit to bear the weight of heavy traffic passing to and fro. Yet let us imagine for the nonce that it *is* thirty years ago, and that you and I, reader, are standing on the old bridge, in the deep-hushed stillness of an early summer's night—standing there, not alone, but invisible, though a flood of moon-

light is falling on the group who are sharing our midnight saunter.

They are three in number: a man past middle age, on whose bent form and silvered head the weight of years seems to have pressed with no light hand, and two of those beings in whom life, like an early summer's blossom, seems just bursting forth in the glory and strength of its beauty. Unconsciously they have sought the moonlit side of the bridge, and are gazing from the silvery flood beneath far over the shining meadows, fragrant with the half-cut masses of dewy hay, into the distant haze, where the deep-red glow of many a ceaseless fire tells of the miners and their occupation.

“ How lovely, and how still! Do let us stand here just a few minutes more. The plash of the water is so delicious, and the coolness so pleasant after that hot room. We shall hear the church clock strike in a few minutes; it was more than half-past eleven when we started, and I have a fancy to begin my birthday here, and have you and papa wish me many happy returns the very moment the ‘witching

hour' has struck, and my eighteenth year begun."

And the speaker, a brown-haired fairy creature, who, like King Arthur's daughter, seemed, in spite of the age she so proudly vaunted—

"Less of the woman than the child"—

looked straight up with those confiding coaxing brown eyes of hers into the face of her tall companion, then let them travel onward to the big bright full summer moon, and then down again to its silver reflection in the depths below.

A bright joyous young life was hers,—little Effie Bramstone,—though it had been a motherless, and, in some respects, a lonely one, for her father, a busy rising doctor, with a large and ever-increasing practice in the Grayford town and neighbourhood, had not always the time he could have wished to bestow on his little daughter, though she was his only child, and the very darling of his heart.

He was, moreover, a gentle studious man, wont to bestow in scientific study the scanty

leisure he might snatch from hours of business ; and though loving to watch his child's gay spirits, as he might those of a bird or a kitten, he had little apparent sympathy with her, still less inclination to share her gambols. But Effie's was a nature that thrrove in the light of its own sunshine, and her life, if uneventful, had at least been shielded from care.

The dawning of her fair womanhood was a fact that had only lately made itself patent to her father's eyes, though there were others more sharp-sighted, who averred that, from bold Harold Leigh to gentle Laurence Grahame, the young men of Grayford thought no partner in the Grayford merry-meetings half so charming as the doctor's little daughter.

It was Harold Leigh who now stood beside her, looking down into the moonlit waters, and on whose stalwart arm Effie's little hand rested. Harold Leigh, her cousin and her father's ward, the handsomest, most reckless dare-devil among the youngsters for many miles round, but to whom Effie's lightest word was law.

“ Harold the Dauntless ” was his name among

those who knew him best, and indeed the youth bore no distant resemblance to his Danish namesake, with his fair hair tossed back from his brow, and the open, unquailing glance of his bright blue eye, which softened only for little Effie.

A better man than Dr Bramstone it would have been hard to find, nor one less fitted to deal with his troublesome charge.

He was for ever remonstrating in his gentle conciliating way with Harold, and yet for ever defending him from the harsher criticisms of others, when some escapade, more daring than the last, had brought him into public notoriety ; nay, Effie had never seen her father's spirit so roused, as when his old friend and fellow-collegian, Mr Grahame, the parish clergyman, had taken upon himself to speak somewhat severely of Harold's inattention to study and disregard of his own admonitions during the hours they were supposed to read together.

Mr Grahame was a cold punctilious man, as unlike his old friend as it was possible to be, though they had many subjects in common in

their mutual love of science. And so in that little household the two young things had it all their own way, and the father and guardian was well content to have it so ; nay, almost to forget his own careworn life in the pleasure of watching them.

He knew what was likely to come of all this, and the thought gave him no uneasiness ; nay more,—but let the fresh young voices tell their own tale, as they linger there in the sweetness of the summer night, with the soft splash of the waters making their never-ceasing harmony.

“It has been such a pleasant day,” say the girl’s joyous tones, “not a drawback from first to last, but I think this walk home is the pleasantest of all. I am so glad we persuaded papa not to have the carriage.”

“Ay, that would have spoiled all the romance of the thing ; but we shall have the doctor down upon us with night fogs, river vapours, &c., if you don’t take better care of yourself, little one ;” and Harold bends down to draw the white summer cloak more closely round his cousin, who laughs as she looks up in his face,

and asks if he thinks there is much protection in a thin gossamer thing like that. "Will you have my coat?" he asks, quite seriously, at which she laughs more than ever, tells him he is growing as fidgety as an old woman, and wonders how any one can dream of cold on such a heavenly night.

"Yes; but remember you 've been increasing your circulation by those energetic valses. Why, I can feel the pulse in this little hand going like a mill-wheel."

"Dear Harold, you are growing dreadfully wise and medical in your observations. However, I hail it as a good symptom that your dislike to papa's plan is going off."

"Never, Effie, never. I may get accustomed, like a cab-horse, to the galling collar, but I can never like the prospect of settling down for life as a mere bone-setter, a walking pill-box ; pah ! the very ideas are revolting. There are but two professions in the world worth going in for—the army and the navy. I am too old for the last, and your father will not move a finger in trying to get me a commission ;—but there, I did not

mean to vex you, pretty one. I'll be content to do anything, settle down as a country saw-bones for life, if only"— He broke off suddenly, for clear and solemn through the stillness of the night there came the twelve measured strokes of the old church clock, announcing that a fresh year of little Effie's life had begun.

As the twelfth died away, Dr Bramstone, who had been standing a little apart, as if wishing to avoid the stream of moonlight which like a glory was falling on the two young heads, came forward to his daughter's side, and laying both hands on her shoulders, turned the bright face towards himself.

"God bless you, my treasure," he said, fervently. "And may He spare you to see many happy anniversaries of this day—the day that was at once the saddest and the brightest of your father's life."

And as the old man looked down into the brown eyes, there rose before him the vision of others as beautiful, but more timid and fawn-like, which, seventeen years ago, he had closed for their long sleep—whose last look on earth

had been for him, and for the little helpless legacy who was thenceforward to be his comfort.

“ Dear father,” murmured the girl, kissing him softly ; but the next moment another hand claimed its birthday clasp, and Dr Bramstone turned away as Harold’s face bent over his cousin.

“ Little Effie, sweet cousin, may you have all the happiness that can be imagined. My lips are unchained now, Effie ; for I promised your father to wait till this day before telling you something ; can you guess what ? ”

“ Not a word ? ” as her eyes, full of innocent wonder, were raised to his. “ Dear Effie, now that we are children no longer,” and Harold drew up his tall figure in the pride and dignity of his almost nineteen years, “ can you not see what is the guiding-star of my life ? Wild, scapegrace as I am, and I don’t attempt to deny the fact, cannot you see that your little hand can guide me with a silken thread ? Effie, darling, promise that it shall be always so—that we shall belong to each other for life.”

The boy had not spoken badly, and he knew it. Many a man, well skilled in the world's ways, might have envied the frank power of those loving words. Many a woman, whose heart is swayed between the influences of love and prudence, might have longed for the proud confidence with which Effie looked up in her young lover's eyes, before, with her face half hidden against his shoulder, she whispered the little word which was all he needed.

“Mine always—my treasure to cherish and defend,” he murmured, holding her to his heart; and then he drew Effie to her father's side, and eagerly claimed the old man's sanction and blessing.

“I have kept my promise, uncle! I said I would not speak to her till to-night, and *now* you will not refuse to let me call you ‘father?’”

Very tenderly, yet half sadly, with the hard-earned wisdom of his nearly threescore years, Dr Bramstone smiled on the young things. He could not for the moment find voice to utter any of the prudent warnings which would

have befitted his age and experience, for the image of his lost wife seemed to rise before his memory, and her eyes to smile at him through those brown wistful orbs of his little daughter.

“God bless thee, child,” he said, stooping to kiss her. “Little Effie, my house fairy! So it has come at last—ay, even sooner than I looked for it; and the old father’s place in her heart is gone for ever.”

“Not gone—never gone, dearest father,” the girl whispered, laying her soft cheek to his. “Effie will always love you, dear; and you—you *do* love Harold a little, don’t you?”

And she took her lover’s hand and laid it gently in Dr Bramstone’s.

The old man looked with a strange mixture of fond pride and doubt in the face of the handsome lad.

“My boy,” he said, “my sister’s son, I can grudge you nothing, scarce even my little Effie. And yet—she is a tender plant, Harold—will you mend your wild ways, and learn to be gentle and wise for her sake?”

The boy’s head drooped for a moment, and

his eyes seemed to take their reflection from the loving gentle light of those raised towards him. "I will try," he said, softly, and both words and tone seemed unlike Harold the Dauntless.

"I know you will, my boy," and the grasp of the hand grew tighter. "But there are other things besides—you will have to learn patience, a new study for you, is it not, Effie? I had to learn it too in my time," and a sigh told how hard the struggle had been. "I waited ten years for my darling; and, children, your united ages together number less than mine when I was able to win her at last. But," he added, in a lighter tone, as he noticed little Effie's anxious eyes, and Harold's downcast look, "you, I trust, need not be tried so hardly. Courage, Harold! A few years patient study and resolute work. With such a prize before you, you would not grudge them? But we must be moving homeward now, or Aunt Jane will begin to grow anxious."

Did Aunt Jane (Dr Bramstone's widowed sister, who since his wife's death had been an

inmate of his house) know by her woman's instinct what had passed in that moonlight homeward walk? Certain it is, that even before a word passed between them, the girl fancied she could detect a more than usual tenderness in the clasp of her motherly arms as she gave Effie her kiss of greeting, and murmured her fond wish for the happiness of the birthday so lately begun. Did the hall-lamp reveal those tell-tale roses on the girl's cheeks, and their corresponding signals on Harold's fair sun-burnt features?

But Aunt Jane was a wise woman, and knew when silence was better and more eloquent than words, and she asked not a single question as she helped "the child" to lay aside her pretty dress, and dismissing the maid, herself brushed and arranged the cloud of dark wavy hair, and saw the flushed cheek laid to rest on the pillow.

Not till her aunt was just leaving the room did Effie suddenly recall her, and sitting up, threw her arms round her neck, and whispered that she was *so* happy—*so* very happy, she felt as if she could never thank God enough. Aunt

Jane kissed and blessed her, and went away, feeling her good old heart somewhat troubled and bewildered with the suddenness of the news.

But she met her nephew on the stairs, and the bright joyous look on his handsome face drove away all her prudent doubts ; for, like every other member of that household, Aunt Jane worshipped Harold, and was subservient to his slightest wish.

“ Give a fellow a kiss, dear old Aunt Jenny,” he said, holding her fast. “ I see she has told you. There ! ain’t I the luckiest fellow in the world ? ”

“ Indeed you ought to be, dear boy,” the old lady answered, putting both hands on his shoulders, as she stood on the step above him, and looking straight into the bright fearless blue eyes. “ She is a sweet child ; but, O Harold ! you must be good to her, for she has never felt a rough wind or heard an unkind word, and I think neglect would break her heart.”

The boy tossed his head a little impatiently.

“I know, Aunt Jenny, I know. Do you suppose she isn’t all the whole world to me? But there—’tis nearly one o’clock, and your dear old eyes look heavy with sleep. You shall lecture Effie and me both to-morrow.”

And he sprang up the stairs, whistling “My love is but a lassie yet,” but Aunt Jane noticed how the whistle ceased and the step grew lighter as he passed Effie’s door.

CHAPTER II.

LONG bright June days, with glowing roses bursting into bloom, and honeysuckle making the hedges fragrant; with the green swathes of grass falling steadily before the mower’s scythe; with the ceaseless song of birds, and with gorgeous sunsets, whose hues of gold and crimson melt into the tender dewy haze of summer twilight—has there not come to each of us in turn *one* year in which these things have seemed even sweeter than of yore? *One* year in which the river has seemed to mur-

mur with a softer tone, and the placid moon-beams to look down upon us in more friendly guise ?

Surely little Effie thought so, as in the happy days which followed that memorable birthday she wandered in the meadows by her lover's side, or stood with him on the old bridge, which to her seemed ever a hallowed spot.

And Harold—how was it with him ? He had won his prize—the guardian angel who was to ward evil from him for ever—was he not content ?

Alas ! with some men, the secure possession of a treasure often robs it of half its value.

Fondly as he loved his little cousin, Harold would almost rather she had been less easy to win, less entirely devoted to himself, and free from all heart-flutterings and doubts. He would then at least have had more interest and excitement to mark his wooing, and for excitement Harold pined.

His hatred of the profession chosen for him by his uncle, and towards which his so-called studies had hitherto tended, was growing upon

him more and more; and one day he spoke of his opposition to it, in no measured terms, to the pained and astonished Effie. "I don't blame your father," he said, almost angrily, as Effie timidly tried to interrupt him. "He is a good man, and meant for the best, Heaven knows; but it's a hard and bitter thing for a fellow like me, who feels young and strong enough to have the world before him, to be chained down to such a life! Sick people, whiny voices, bone-setting, bah! it makes me wild to think of it; I who love fresh air, and freedom, and sunshine, and all the beautiful things of life."

And he flung up his head like a colt that feels the bit chafing him, and yet finds all his strength inadequate to throw off the galling irritant.

That walk was the most silent the lovers had taken, for Effie spoke not another word until they re-entered the house: then, laying her two little hands softly in his, she looked up in his face, and murmured—

"Poor Harold, dear Harold! I am glad you

told me your trouble. We ought to help each other to bear things."

Before he could answer she was gone, and Harold fancied he could hear her voice within her father's study.

Little did he guess what those pleading tones were saying, or dream of the unselfish spirit which could sacrifice its own dearest wishes for his sake.

"But, my child, have you considered? This plan, even if I were able to carry it out, would separate Harold from you entirely, for years perhaps, for the army is not a profession in which a man can afford to marry young."

"But we can wait, and love each other faithfully all through those years. Dear father, I am in earnest. I will wait for my Harold a lifetime, sooner than feel that for my sake he is chained down to what he so dislikes."

A lifetime! How easy it seems to talk thus at seventeen, and how often in after years, when silver threads mingled with the hair now so dark and abundant, did Effie recall this conversation.

“You are your mother’s child, Effie. It was almost in those words she answered me twenty-eight years ago! But again, is it certain that Harold has perseverance enough to work for the examinations which would have to be passed? Remember, *nothing* can be gained without application, and you know how, whenever it is possible, he turns aside and avoids it.”

“He would work with such an object before him. He has told me so a hundred times. Dear father, for your Effie’s sake, try if you cannot make Harold happy.”

“What can I do?” the doctor said that evening, when talking the matter over with his sister. “The boy’s heart is set on it, and Effie’s too, for his sake; and I would fain make them happy, but how is it to be accomplished? Even if—which I think very possible—I succeed in obtaining a nomination through the interest of Lord —, and Harold reads hard enough to pass the examinations creditably, the purchase of the commission would require ready money; and as you know, I have little or none to spare, and Effie cannot touch her mother’s fortune

until she comes of age. Harold's own inheritance is scarcely more than £5000, and"—

"But I have saved a little, brother," Mrs Randall said, interrupting him hastily; "and for whom would I so gladly expend that little, as for these dear children, if indeed it is to be for their happiness; but I had hoped that Harold would follow your profession, and be a comfort to you in your old age."

"We cannot break a young thoroughbred into hard daily work at the plough," Dr Bramstone answered, with a half sad half proud glance at the picture of his "boy's" handsome face, which hung on the wall opposite to him.

"No, Jenny dear; no thought of my own disappointment should influence me for a moment. But are you really in earnest in what you suggested?"

That Aunt Jane was in earnest was soon proved, for in little more than a year from the time the subject was first broached, Harold Leigh held an ensign's commission in Her Majesty's —th infantry regiment, then quartered at Plymouth. Not one of the quiet household

left behind—no, not even Effie—could quite realise the thought of their own loss when they saw him go off, so bright and eager to enter on his new life; so full of hope and spirit, and so tender in his parting words and promises of letters. It had been his whim that Effie should walk with him as far as the bridge—the spot hallowed to them both by the memory of the words and the promises there spoken; and as they clasped hands at parting, it was agreed that *there* they should meet again for the first time, when Harold should return home on leave.

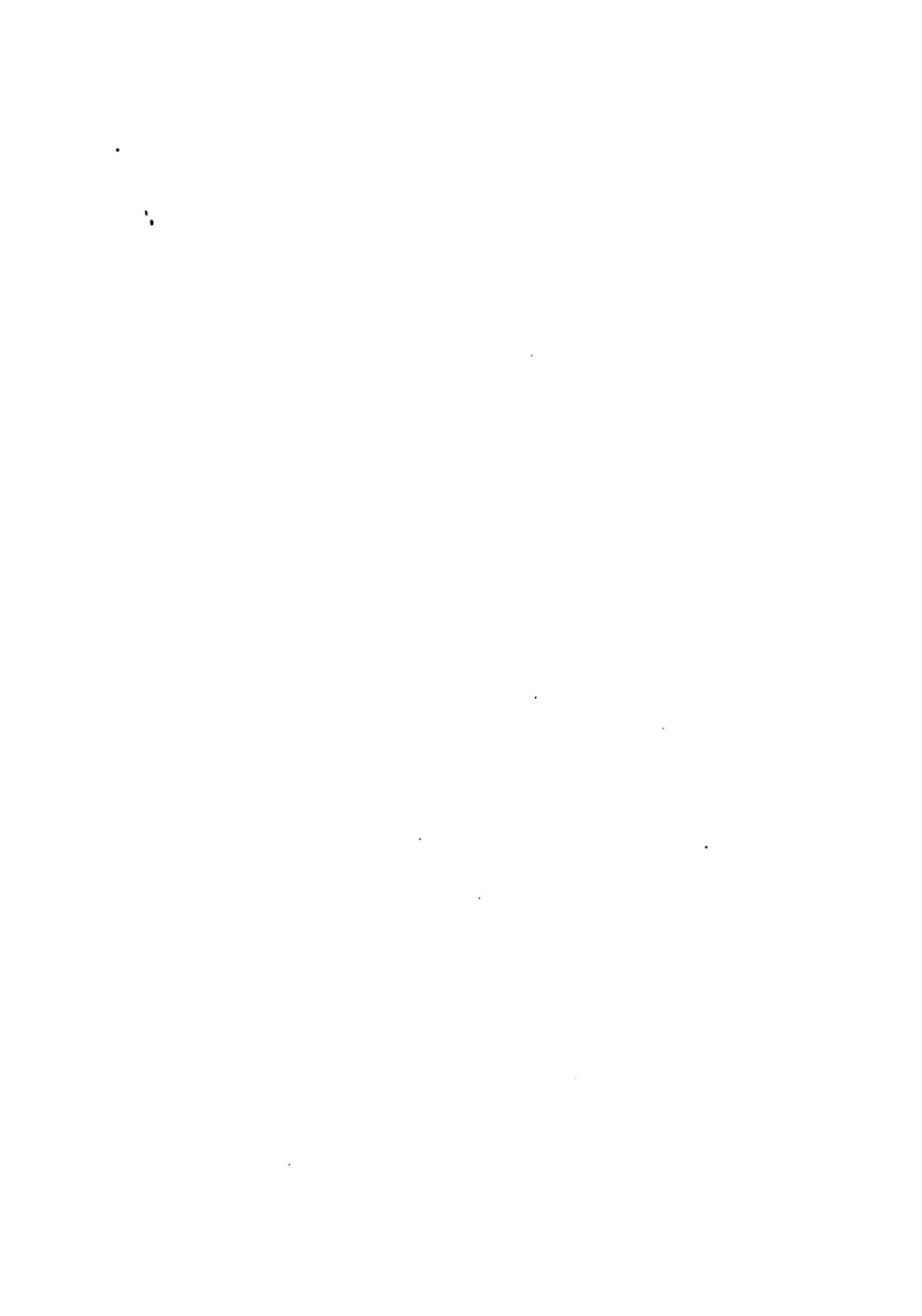
As soon as his nephew had definitely resigned all thought of the medical profession, Dr Bramstone had decided on taking a new pupil, who in time he purposed to raise into partnership with himself.

His choice fell, not unnaturally, on Laurence Grahame, the son of his own old friend, and Harold's contemporary and occasional companion, though no two youths could have been found more unlike, or more thoroughly unsuited to one another.

It was against Effie's secret wish that Laur-

ence became an inmate of her father's house, although she would not say so, when she saw how great a comfort were Laurence's quiet ways and little acts of thoughtfulness to Dr Bramstone in his advancing years and failing health. Only she avoided his company for herself as much as possible, and even drew on herself a mild reproof from Aunt Jane, for her seeming prejudice and dislike.

Poor Laurence Grahame! he knew his love was utterly in vain; yet he clung to it still, hoping against hope, and worshipping the very ground beneath those fairy footsteps.



PART II.



P A R T I I.

“ And like those waters rushing
Among the wooden piers,
A flood of thoughts came o'er me,
And fill'd my eyes with tears.

“ How often, oh how often,
In the days that had gone by,
I had stood on that bridge at midnight,
And gazed on that wave and sky !

“ How often, oh how often,
I had wish'd that the ebbing tide
Would bear me away on its bosom
O'er the ocean wild and wide !

“ For my heart was hot and restless,
And my life was full of care ;
And the burden laid upon me
Seem'd greater than I could bear.”

IT is summer-time once more—the long August days have come, and the corn-fields are glowing in the low mellow light, and the ripples of the water are shining golden in the evening sunbeams, as Effie stands in the

old place on the bridge, shading her eyes with her hand, and looking wistfully down into the bright water. She is a little altered, not much, in the three years that have passed since the June night on which she and Harold first plighted their troth on that very spot ; and of late the shadow of a coming heavy sorrow has fallen on her blithe spirit, for her father seems all at once to have sunk into feebleness and old age, and she knows, though she dare not own it to herself, that even her loving arms cannot hold him on earth much longer.

Harold has been home during the winter, and cheered them by his gay spirits and his bright frank ways. Even Laurence Grahame has scarcely been able to resent the young soldier's good-humoured patronage. The old uncle and aunt have basked contentedly in the sunshine of their "boy's" presence, and to Effie it has been a time of unspeakable bliss ; but his leave was not of long duration, and perhaps this was as well, for even before it had expired he had begun to grow a little weary of the dulness of the neighbourhood, and to smile contemptuously

at the homely old-fashioned ways of the little household. And since that time, Effie had tried hard to persuade herself that his letters were not less frequent and more brief, or to frame excuses for him in her loving loyal heart when forced to acknowledge that such was the case.

She had had a weary time of late, poor child ! as was told by her heavy eyelids and loss of colour ; for Dr Bramstone, although the gentlest and least exacting of invalids, was daily and hourly growing more feeble, and not even his sister could supply Effie's place in the sick-room.

On the face of Laurence Grahame, too, a heavy cloud had of late been settling. He went about like one oppressed with a secret burden of care, and his eyes often followed Effie with a look of mournful pity, very different from the old distant adoration. Even Aunt Jane had noticed his altered looks, but she attributed them solely to anxiety in her brother's behalf.

At last, on the afternoon in question, Laurence's father had come to read and talk for a while to his old friend, and Aunt Jane had

insisted on Effie's profiting by his visit to take a longer time for air and exercise.

As the girl passed through the garden, she caught sight of Laurence, standing, thoughtful and sad, under the great cedar tree. She smiled and nodded to him as she passed, and he made a half movement as if to follow her, then checked himself, and turned gloomily away.

Effie's steps took, as they frequently did, the direction of the bridge. She often crossed it with Aunt Jane, on her way into the town, where both the "doctor's ladies" were well known and thankfully hailed as relieving angels in many an abode of suffering and misery; but she seldom lingered on it to lean over the low balustrade, and gaze down into the depths beneath, and fancy she heard again the loving words which had first mingled with those rushing waters, except when, as now, she chanced to be quite alone.

Was she in a dream, and had the sound of the river conjured up Harold's voice? She started—turned—it was in truth Harold who stood before her; yet so changed, so grave and

haggard, that for the moment she scarcely believed her senses. Ah! this was the cause of the long silence which had so troubled her! How wrong, how foolish she had been to dream of any other cause! How good of him to come back now to cheer her father, and give her such a joyful surprise!

She was springing forward to seize his hand; but, to her amazement, he seemed almost to shrink from her greeting.

“How is my uncle?” he asked; and the voice sounded hollow and unnatural to the girl’s startled ear.

“Very ill. Ah! sadly ill and changed. But you will do him good, Harold. Dear Harold, how kind of you to come!”

“Kind!”

The word had in it a terrible significance of bitterness, such as even Effie could not fail to hear. She clasped her hands together, and shrank back a little, looking up in his face with her large dark eyes, like a dumb animal expecting a blow. For a moment there was silence; then she said, timidly—

“Harold, dear, are you ill?”

He shook his head impatiently. She came a step nearer, and laid her hand upon his arm.

The blow had struck home now; no need to point the weapon; the woman's instinct had divined the worst.

“Harold, I know now; do not be afraid to tell me. I am but a weak girl, dear, but I have seen something of other people's sorrows. It is that you want me to give you back your promise, and you have come to tell me so, have you not?”

He started back, and looked at her fixedly. “Who told you so? But I need not ask. That fellow Grahame has had his cursed spies about me”—

“Hush! Harold.” And unconsciously he looked with a kind of awe at the slight childish form and face, and checked his fierce passion at her bidding. Then Effie said quietly, “Lawrence has not told me anything. I have no reason for what I said but now. But still I think—I feel that it is so. Dear Harold, speak,

and tell me all ; I can bear it better than suspense."

"Effie, Effie!" The strong man felt his manhood sorely shaken within him as he looked down on the small frail creature on whom he had inflicted so deadly an injury. "Effie, how *can* I tell you? How find words to express how I despise and hate myself, and—Effie! in mercy do not look at me like that, or I shall wish myself dead!"

It was the old story. To the passionate impetuous nature the influences of the present had been too strong for the memory of the past, and the young soldier had found himself in the miserable position of having pledged his honour to one woman, while his heart (so he believed) was irrevocably bestowed upon another.

With his love, too, mingled some share of ambition and of pride ; for Blanche Maitland was his superior by birth and worldly position, though these advantages were little recked of by her suitors, in comparison with her superb beauty.

Surely it was the natural wilfulness of woman-

hood which alone had led her, after refusing a dozen offers from men of far higher standing, to bestow her heart upon the young ensign, whose sword was almost his whole fortune, and to promise (since her father's consent could not be obtained) to elope with him as soon as he should be free from what to her he had represented as the bonds of a mere boyish entanglement.

Poor little Effie ! As the river flowed on, bearing with it the sound of that cruel confession, as long ago it had borne that exchange of loving promises which had made her life so happy, she felt a sudden wild longing to throw herself into its cold bosom, and be whirled away for ever into the long sleep that knows no dream of trouble ! Yet she would not let him see her agony, far too sharp and deep to admit of even the alleviation of pride.

But as she looked at him, standing like a culprit before her, his proud head bent, and his face working with the pain of bitter self-reproach, she almost for a moment forgot her own sufferings in pity for him.

There was a long, long silence. The river

flowed on its unceasing way, and presently the old town-clock struck the hour, as it had done at midnight on Effie's birthday.

Then the girl spoke, and her tones had a quiet muffled sound, that struck strangely on her companion's ear.

"Harold, dear, I must go back to my father now. You will not come and see him?"

"No," as he made a hasty negative gesture; "it might be better not, any excitement is so dangerous for him."

"Farewell, Harold; nay, dear, it must be 'brother Harold' now, must it not? Like the old days when you first came to live with us, and I was a tiny, tiny child, and used to sit on your knee. You were always very good to me, you always have been; and we will forget all that has passed since, won't we? Don't vex yourself, dear;" for, overcome by the touching childlike patience of the bright creature whose life he had blighted, the soldier had turned away, covering his face with his hands, and vainly trying to check his deep-drawn sobs.

"Don't grieve. It was not your fault that I

was not worth loving well enough to hold you to your promise. Some day, perhaps, you will come and see the old places again, Harold, you and your wife ; and—but my father will be waiting—God bless you, Harold ! ”

Scarce knowing what he did, her cousin grasped the two little hands she held out to him, and bent his face over them for a moment. His tears dropped fast, but Effie’s eyes were dry, and her look fixed and steadfast. She could not afford the relief of weeping, for she had need of all the strength she possessed.

One more “ God bless you ”—it was she who spoke, for Harold’s lips could frame no utterance—and the two, who had sworn to spend their lives together, parted, never more to travel the same road on earth. When Effie reached home, her eyes were still tearless, and her voice had the same gentle monotonous sound that is sometimes acquired by those who have been long in a sick-room.

Even Laurence Grahame, who watched her constantly (and who was better informed of events at a distance than her now dying father and

Aunt Jane, whose interest centred in his room), could detect no difference, and never knew the exact moment at which Effie became aware of her desertion.

And the girl told no one, not until after her father had gently sunk to rest, speaking to the last loving words to his darling, and praying for her happiness with the husband to whom he was leaving her ; not until Aunt Jane, almost broken-hearted with the severance of the long tie, was mourning her own loneliness, did Effie tell her that she, too, was alone and comfortless, and that they would henceforth help one another to bear their burden together.

Aunt Jane was grieved, shocked, indignant, all at once. She almost blamed Effie for being so poor-spirited as to grieve over the loss of one who had proved himself so unworthy, and then, in the same breath, burst into tears at the thought of never seeing her handsome boy again.

Not long after, with a woman's true genius for turning circumstances to account, she began to wonder whether poor Laurence's long constancy

might not be crowned with its reward. But the young surgeon and Effie understood each other. They were staunch friends—no more—and each shrank from disturbing that friendship.

Once, shortly after her father's death, he had said to her, "Effie, is it still quite impossible?" and she had answered very gently, "Yes, Lawrence."

From that time, though he remained unmarried till his death, the subject was never again approached between them. He had succeeded to a considerable part of Dr Bramstone's practice, and had taken a house in the busiest quarter of the town ; but he was still a frequent visitor at Rosecroft, and always a welcome one to the two women who continued to pass their quiet lives there.

The younger of the two was indeed a changed being from the gay kittenish Effie of three years ago. Young as she still was, there was the shadow of a great sorrow lying ever across her life ; and, little as her companion guessed it, there were days spent in fierce conflict with the wild passions of her wounded heart, days when

in her misery she could, like the prophet of old, have prayed, "Lord, take my life;" for the burden of living seemed all too heavy, and she longed to sleep through the long night of forgetfulness, and be at rest.

Yet hers was not a nature to give itself up wholly to vain regrets, and she had still one occupation which roused her interests, and for awhile took her out of herself—that of ministering to the poor of Grayford, and, wherever it was possible, relieving those sufferings which were not like her own, unattainable.

"Yet oh! how little, how sadly little it is that one can do, and how much is needed to be done!"

So spoke Effie one autumn evening, when, twilight having overtaken them earlier than they expected, she and Aunt Jane were hastening homeward through some of the worst and most densely-populated streets of Grayford.

Want and misery in every form surrounded them; women in ragged finery, more painful to look at than rags of a more homely nature; children, with scarce anything childlike in their

pinched faces and shrunken forms ; and here and there a knot of half-drunken men, on their way to and from the alehouse.

“ I wish we had not stayed so late,” Aunt Jane replied, nervously, as one of the latter reeled against her in passing. “ Indeed, Effie, you ought to have come home sooner.”

“ Dear auntie, I am sorry. I am afraid it is late, but you see we had so many people to visit, and it would have been hard to disappoint poor Martha Plane, when she asked us to stay and read to her. She seemed so much worse to-day —— Dear auntie, don’t start so, and show that you are frightened. Take hold of my arm, and walk in the middle of the road, and I am sure no one will interfere with us.”

“ There goes the old doctor’s daughter, bless her ! ” said a rough-looking mechanic, standing at the corner of the street.

“ Ay, and the young doctor’s sweetheart,” answered his companion, in a voice purposely loud enough to reach Effie’s ear.

The girl began to grow nervous. She had never met with anything like annoyance before ;

but this was market-night, and the streets were more crowded, and the men less sober, than usual. As they turned a corner, and came suddenly upon a still larger group, she felt her courage failing, and looked round helplessly for some protection.

She had not far to seek. From that very group of men that she dreaded to pass, one suddenly stepped forward, and greeted them with—

“Good evening, ladies. It’s late for you to be about. Here, mates, make room for the lady to pass. It’s the old doctor’s daughter—her as was so good to my little Jim in the fever last year. Get out of the way, you fellows ; d’ye hear ?”

And the man, a gigantic good-humoured navvy, commonly known as “Long Tom” among his comrades, pushed and elbowed a way for the ladies to pass ; and then with genuine, though bashfully-awkward, politeness, volunteered to escort them safely through the town. “You see, Miss Bramstone,” he added, confidentially, for the doctor’s little daughter was his old acquaintance, and he was bound to her by a

long debt of gratitude for past kindness to his sick child—

“ You see, Miss, it’s market-night, and there’s a lot of rough chaps about, and if so be as you and madam here wouldn’t object to me coming in my working-clothes ”—

“ Oh, we shall be very thankful for your company,” said Mrs Randall, eagerly. “ Shall we not, Effie ? ” she added, casting another frightened glance around, and instinctively feeling in her pocket, to see if her purse were still safe.

“ Yes, thank you, Tom,” Effie answered, smiling, and feeling an indescribable relief as she glanced at the broad shoulders of her protector.

So the strangely-assorted trio hastened on until they were clear of the outskirts of the town, when Effie would have dismissed their escort, but Aunt Jane, who had not yet recovered her fears, begged him to see them safe to their own door.

It was a fine still night, and the moon, which had just risen, cast a long vista of silver light over the river as they reached the Bridge.

Effie was very silent as they crossed it; but her eyes rested fixedly on one little spot—how exactly she knew it!—where she and Harold had stood on the occasion of their last meeting.

But what was *that* which crouched, almost in that very spot, beside the low balustrade, evidently trying to avoid being discovered in the moonlight? Effie held her breath, and silently directed Aunt Jane's attention to the dark object. As she did so, it suddenly moved, started into an upright posture, and they then saw that it was a woman. In another moment she had sprung upon the balustrade itself, and with outstretched arms was swaying herself to and fro, evidently preparing to make a deadly plunge into the swirling flood beneath.

Aunt Jane's scream echoed through the silent night. Effie and her companion started forward, and ere the woman could put her desperate intention into execution, she was seized and dragged back into safety, struggling vainly in the navvy's powerful grasp.

“Gently, Missus, don’t ‘ee fight and scratch so: it ain’t no good to we to save you from

being drownded, only a body can't look on and see it done like," said "Long Tom," placidly, as the woman at last stood still, exhausted with her frantic efforts.

She was still young, and bore traces of great beauty, although worn to a shadow, and disfigured by the conflict of wild passions, which her face revealed.

As the navvy, on a sign from Effie, relaxed his hold, only keeping a watchful eye against a renewal of the suicidal attempt, his prisoner, like some wild animal driven to bay, stood panting for breath, and looking with her fierce dilated eyes, from one to another of the three faces regarding her with different expressions of compassionate wonder.

With a sudden impulse of womanly sympathy, Effie stepped forward, and laid her hand on her shoulder. The other shook her off hastily, and there was a kind of passionate self-abhorrence in her tone as she said—

"Don't—don't! Keep away. You do not know—you cannot have aught in common with such as me!"

"We are both women," answered Effie's gentle accents. "And," she added, in a yet lower tone, "if I mistake not, we have both known heavy trials. Nay, do not turn from me, but tell me your griefs, and let us see if we cannot help you. Do not be afraid of this lady," as Aunt Jane's kindly instinct made her draw nearer, and touch the cold nerveless hand, "but tell us what has made you so unhappy, and let us see if we cannot help you."

Again the woman cast a frightened glance around, but there was less of despairing wildness now in her large dark eyes.

"I'll tell you, lady," she said, looking up at Effie, and speaking rapidly, as if half mistrusting her own powers. "I'll tell you all my misery, and then see if you had not done better to let me cool my poor brain in yonder waters."

The tale was not an uncommon one. When Mary Wilson, then a bright-cheeked bonny lass of twenty, lost her father, and the family, consisting of his widow and two daughters, had to give up their farm, and struggle as best they could to earn a maintenance, she, being the

cleverest of the family, succeeded in getting into a house of business in Grayford. Here she accidentally became acquainted with the clerk of an attorney living in the town. He was some years older than herself, very gentle and courteous in manner, very kind to her widowed mother, generous in providing for her young sister, and so tender in his devotion to herself, that Mary, at his advice, threw up her engagement at the shop (much to her employer's indignation), and they were married.

They took a quiet lodging in the town, and for a little time all went well ; but after about a year had elapsed, Mary began to observe an alteration in her husband's manner. He became moody, desponding, and intensely irritable. About this time, Mary became a mother, and in her delight over her little son's perfections, she heeded less her husband's increasing depression and long absences from home.

At last, one day when he had stayed away longer than usual, she received from him a short note, containing a small sum of money, and a few words of cold cruel farewell, explaining

that she was not, in the sight of Heaven, his wife at all, for that he had been married while very young, and that his real wife still lived, although they had been separated for years. As his circumstances had of late been very bad, his friends had advised him to seek a reconciliation with his wife, whose large fortune was settled upon herself; and he therefore found himself compelled to take leave of Mary from henceforth, although she would always have his sincerely good wishes, &c.

The cold heartlessness of this note crushed Mary to the earth. Her mother was dead. She could not carry the burden of her disgrace to her young sister, and she had no friend to say a cheering word to her in her misery.

A few days after his father's cruel letter arrived, her child fell ill, and the wretched pittance which had been sent was soon expended in a doctor's attendance, while none was left for the purchase of the wine and nourishing food which alone might have saved the baby's life. It gradually pined and faded away, and then the little wailing voice was

hushed for ever, and the mother, homeless and penniless, was left alone with her despair.

While her baby lived, she had pawned her very clothes to obtain the shelter of a night's lodging; but now that he was gone, and she had seen him laid in a pauper's grave, she felt that she could struggle no more—surely God *must* be more merciful than man, and she would pray Him to forgive her sin, and not to be angry with her for seeking the only rest she knew of in the cool waters she had often gazed at longingly, when her heart ached and her temples throbbed with the weight of the misery of life!

“Poor woman, poor mother! You would not have found rest there; you would not have found your little one; he is waiting for you yonder,” and Effie’s hand pointed to the star-lit dome of deep blue sky.

“Will you not have patience for a very little while, till God thinks you are ready to go to him? It was His mercy which sent us here just in time; and now you must come home with us, at any rate for a while; we will not leave you to suffer alone.”

"Effie, dearest, have you considered?" whispered her aunt, hastily.

"I think so, dear auntie. I see no other way to help her to-night. To-morrow we will talk to Mr Grahame about her."

Here "Long Tom," who had not been an unmoved spectator of the scene, stepped forward.

"Asking your pardon, ladies, I know the woman now I looks closer at her, though I was a bit flustered at first, like. It's her as used to lodge over Widow Martin's little shop, and as used to wear herself to skin and bone, a-trying to earn victuals for her sick babby."

"I know you too," said the woman, turning her large startled eyes upon him. "You gave my child a piece of bread once, when we were starving ; God bleſs you for it!"

"Come home," said Effie, drawing the now unresisting hand within her own.

Mary walked for a few steps quietly by her side, then stopped suddenly, and snatched her hand away, while the old wild look returned to her face.

"No, no! Where are you taking me? Why should I live on to bear the burden of my misery and my shame! Why not end it all?"

"Because"—and Effie held her arm more firmly, while her face in its calm sweetness seemed to possess an angel's power over the despairing spirit—"Because God's ways are not as our ways. He will not let us sink beneath the burden He has given us to bear, but in His own good time He will make a way for us to escape, that we may be able to bear it. If your boy can see you now, will it not grieve him to think his mother a coward?"

A little later, and they were at their own door, whence bright lights gleamed a welcome such as the worn out wanderer had not met for many a day. Soon kind voices were pressing on her food and warmth, and gentle hands helping to lay her weary frame to rest.

"What will you do with her?" asked Mr Grahame, who at Effie's request had come over to Rosecroft to discuss the adventure and its

consequences. "Her story may be genuine—I believe it is, from the particulars I have been able to gather, but that is no reason why you should be burdened with her support. My dear Effie, half Grayford would be compounding to attempt suicide on such terms."

"We would not keep her in idleness," answered Effie, glancing at her aunt, who said, hesitatingly—

"Sarah leaves us at Christmas, and it will be then necessary for Effie and me to take another servant, and we thought—that is"—

The clergyman shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"My dear friends, you are very good, very charitable, and both sadly youthful and imprudent in your ideas. And yet," he added, after a moment's pause, "I hardly know how to advise against such an act of charity."

"Nor, even if you did, would my self-willed Effie here follow your advice, I fear," said Mrs Randall, smiling. And Effie's eyes cordially thanked her old friend for having abstained from more open opposition to her wishes.

PART III.



PART III.

“ But now it has fallen from me,
It is buried in the sea ;
And only the sorrow of others
Throws its shadow over me.

“ Yet whenever I cross the river,
On its bridge with wooden piers,
Like the odour of brine from the ocean,
Comes the thought of other years.

“ And I think how many thousands
Of care-encumber’d men,
Each bearing his burden of sorrow,
Have stood on the bridge since then !

“ I see the long procession
Still passing to and fro ;
The young heart hot and restless,
And the old subdued and slow.

“ And for ever and for ever,
As long as the river flows,
As long as the heart has passions,
As long as life has woes.

“ The moon and its broken reflection,
And its shadows shall appear,
As the symbol of love in Heaven,
And its wavering image here.”

“ MY DEAR COUSIN,—

“ **T**HOUGH we have hitherto been strangers
to one another, I hope that is no reason
why we need always continue to be so. I dare-
say you may have seen in the papers, about a

month since, the announcement of the birth of our second little daughter (we lost our first in teething fits more than a year ago). Baby is to be christened on Tuesday next, and Harold and I both hope that you will not refuse to come and stay with us for a few days, and be the little lady's godmother. She is to be called Blanche Eveline—my name and your's, is it not?; but I have bargained that she should be generally known as 'Eva,' lest when she comes to years of discretion, the horrible distinction of 'Old Blanche' and 'Young Blanche' should arise. I believe she is a pretty child, as babies go, and she has eyes like her father. Harold is out on parade, so I can send no message from him. We have taken a small house outside the town, where the regiment is quartered. It is a dull neighbourhood, and I have no inducements to offer; but still I hope you will come.—I remain, yours affectionately,

"BLANCHE LEIGH."

"You will not go, Effie? Surely you will not lower yourself to accept their insolent hospi-

tality?" was Aunt Jane's angry comment, as her niece handed her the letter from Harold's wife.

Effie was silent for a moment, and then a strange sweet smile flitted over her face.

"Should you blame me very much if I did, dear auntie? I should like—yes, I should much like to see Harold again; my brother, as I always call him in my prayers. And I should like to be friendly with his wife, and to see his little daughter—perhaps to hold her once in my arms. I wonder whether it was his thought to call her Eveline, auntie? My mother's name, was it not?"

"Ay, child; I well remember your father's start when he first heard what we had named the baby, for at first he was too much plunged in grief to notice you, poor little helpless innocent, whose life had cost so dear! But he never could bear the sound of 'Eva' after we buried your mother; and it was I who took to calling you 'Little Effie,' though it was not your right name."

"And now Harold's child has my mother's

name! My dear old father—I think it would have pleased him. 'Tis a kind letter of Blanche's, dear auntie. I think she is willing to like me a little; and if you do not think it wrong, I should like to go."

"But, my child," interposed Aunt Jane, anxiously.

"Yes, I know; but it is so long ago. I have grown much older in these three years, auntie. I am sure I should not be doing wrong to go."

And her quiet firm will carried its point as usual, and Aunt Jane saw her depart, with many anxious forebodings that the trial she was going to meet would be more painful than any anticipations she could form.

It was late in the evening when a fly drove up to the door of "Woodbine Villa" (a small shabby-looking abode, belying its romantic name), and a slight figure alighting, paid the driver, and gave directions about her box to the slatternly-looking maid who opened the door.

A moment later, the visitor found herself ushered into a little hot drawing-room, so choked with furniture and ornaments, that at

first her bewildered eyes could hardly make out its solitary occupant, who was lying on the sofa, reading a novel.

However, she rose and came forward, as the maid announced "Miss Bramstone;" and even in that first brief survey Effie was able to discover what a very lovely woman Harold's wife was, in spite of the drawbacks of untidy dress and surroundings.

She was probably a year or two older than her husband, tall, and gracefully formed, with dark languid blue eyes, masses of golden hair, and a complexion which defied criticism. There was no look of ill-health about her, only of languid indifference and decided boredom.

Still she had the manners of a high-bred lady, and brightened into something like animation as she greeted Effie, and said how good it had been of her to take so long a journey in their baby's behalf. Effie asked after her little godchild, and was told that she was probably asleep. "I have not seen much of her to-day," Blanche added, with a suppressed yawn. "At her age, the small things are better in the nursery."

And then Effie spoke the name she had schooled herself to pronounce calmly, and hoped her Cousin Harold was well?

“Yes, quite, thank you,” Mrs Leigh replied, scanning the slender figure with a kind of good-natured superiority, and thinking how *very* young and inexperienced her husband must once have been, to have let himself be drawn into an entanglement with that little brown quiet-looking creature.

“I expect him every minute, and probably he will bring one of the officers back to dinner. It is the only relief we occasionally get to our dullness here. We have almost been obliged to give up going out (I could not afford to dress decently), since papa’s unkindness after my marriage. You heard about that, I suppose?”

Effie answered in a confused manner that she had heard something, and that she was very much surprised—she meant very sorry—to hear that the Leighs were in such straitened circumstances. She was listening at that very moment to the approach of a step, which, in spite of all

previous resolutions, set her heart beating with almost painful rapidity.

Another instant, and it was over. She had heard his voice again, and in his wife's presence had given him her hand in all cousinly and sisterly friendship. When she ventured to raise her eyes, she saw how altered and careworn was the handsome, but no longer boyish, face.

She noticed too, with sorrow, how his eyes failed to light up into anything like pleasure as they rested on his wife's lovely features; and how, after briefly saying to him, "Here is your Cousin Effie," Blanche had turned from her husband, without a word or token of greeting, and bestowed all her attention on the young officer who accompanied him, and who seemed overwhelmed with delight at the beautiful creature's evident satisfaction in his society.

Meanwhile, after the first touch of Harold's hand, the first look in his face, half Effie's shyness had passed away.

He was not *her* Harold—the boy whom her father had so loved, and who had been the companion and darling of her childhood—he was an

aged care-stricken man of the world, who had chosen his own lot in life, and must bear the burden as best he might.

More than once during the brief conversation between them, consisting chiefly of inquiries and answers about Aunt Jane, and their old friends the Grahames (father and son), Effie saw, or fancied she saw, her cousin's glance rest anxiously or impatiently upon his wife.

At last, taking advantage of a pause, he said, somewhat reproachfully—

“Blanche, my love, had you not better take Effie up to her room to rest? You forget how tired she must be, after her long journey.”

Mrs Leigh shrugged her pretty shoulders very slightly, for Harold's remark had interrupted the most interesting point of the ensign's conversation; however, she rose good-humouredly, and piloted Effie up-stairs, and along the narrow ill-lighted passage that led to her room.

As they passed an open door, Effie caught sight of a woman sitting by the fire, with a small bundle in her lap.

“Oh! may I go in?” she asked her hostess.

“I should like to see the baby.” Blanche gave smiling consent, and looked on half contemptuous, half amused, as her guest, kneeling on the floor, gazed at the tiny blue-eyed creature, and murmured inarticulate sounds into the baby’s ear.

“May I take her?” she next asked; and the nurse willingly acquiesced, well pleased that her charge should meet with attention that contrasted so strongly with its mamma’s indifference. And Effie sat down in the low chair, holding Harold’s child in her arms, and feeling the last remnant of bitterness melt away from her heart, as she silently prayed for a blessing on the little fair helpless thing, with the blue eyes and open brow, that already gave promise of strong resemblance to its father.

But she could not remain long, for Blanche grew impatient to return to her other guest, and hurried Effie to her room, begged her to ring for anything she wanted, and hastened away to her own toilette, which, in spite of her complaint of being “too poor to dress decently,” was apt to be as costly and elaborate in the evening as it was untidy and neglected during the day.

It was impossible to help being struck with the splendour of her beauty when she again appeared, with her colour heightened into an exquisite glow, and the few ornaments she wore setting off the dazzling whiteness of her well-turned throat and arms.

Never had Effie felt so conscious of her own insignificance as she entered the drawing-room in the wake of this splendid creature, and Harold rising, hastily presented to her his friend and brother officer, Mr Courtland, with an apology for having forgotten to do so sooner,

The ensign favoured her with a supercilious bow, and again turned his attention to Mrs Leigh, while Harold remained standing by Effie's chair, silent, embarrassed, with that heavy cloud of dissatisfaction again gathering over his brow.

The evening seemed long and wearisome to Effie, so did the days which followed; but when her visit was concluded, she was glad that she had made the effort to come, that she had met Harold once more, had been on kindly

terms with his wife, and held her blue-eyed god-child in her arms.

Throughout her stay, Blanche had treated her in the same friendly manner. Her vanity and her good-nature alike prevented her from feeling anything like jealousy of the woman whose heart she had once been instrumental in almost breaking ; and she considered it scarcely necessary to conceal her own continual petty flirtations from one so simple and unsophisticated. Yet Effie's heart ached for her cousin, when she felt more and more how he had thrown away the substance for the shadow, and had bound himself for life to a woman who had not heart enough to love him, or practise an iota of self-denial for his sake. He was reaping as he had sowed—in all her pity even Effie could scarcely help feeling this, as she contrasted the care-worn irritable man, oppressed with his own poverty, and embittered by a sense of general injustice, with the youth who, but three years ago, seemed to have a life so full of hope and promise opening before him.

Some few days after Effie's return home,

Aunt Jane's kind heart, which was always hankering to see her darling happily "settled in life," was gladdened by the sight of Effie and Laurence Grahame standing in earnest conversation together under the cedar-tree. By Laurence's gestures, she guessed that he was eagerly pleading some cause; and what could it be, save the one he had always had at heart, and on which he had been so long silent. And Effie was not turning from him; on the contrary, she was listening with an expression of rapt attention and interest; surely, surely the moment Aunt Jane had so long hoped for had arrived, and in her old age she should see her child made happy! Poor Aunt Jane! Could she have heard the conversation between the supposed lovers, how quickly would her airy castle have faded away!

"I have thought over your plan, dear Effie," Grahame was saying, "and have mentioned it to my father. We—we think it is like you to be ever thinking of, and working for, others; but we almost doubt whether you know what you are undertaking. You, who are so gentle that you

shrink from seeing an insect hurt, can you bear to look on human suffering by day and night—suffering which your kindness may alleviate, but which no human power is able to cure?"

"God helping me, I think I can, Laurence," she answered, firmly, and looking up with a brighter light in her sweet eyes. "And you know I shall not be alone in the work. Aunt Jane, when once the scheme has your sanction, will, I know, enter into it gladly; and Mary Wilson, who is no common servant, would thankfully devote her life to a work of mercy. But I wish to do nothing rashly, or in my own strength, and therefore I am grateful to you for bringing every difficulty before me."

"Have you remembered," he continued, more solemnly, "that when once the suffering beings whom you propose to relieve have come beneath your roof, in *one* way only can they ever leave it again? Can you bear to be thus familiarised with death, and have it in all its saddest forms brought continually before your mind?"

"It will not come a day sooner than God wills to any one of us," was the calm reply.

“Dear Laurence, you have said your say ; now would you hear mine ? My kindest friend—as you have ever been—my fellow-worker, I trust, in the task I would undertake, there are not many things which a lonely woman can do to make her life of use. I have, I think, perhaps more than many—the gift of being a useful nurse in sickness. There is no merit in it—none whatever ; it is simply a gift (like any other) that I should have a quiet voice, a light step, and powers of endurance greater than many who possess greater strength. I have seen and known much of sorrow in my short life ; and my dear father’s profession brought me frequently in contact with suffering—suffering which it was his joy and privilege to be able to alleviate. I believe I am more fitted than most women for the task I would undertake, and I have no fears in entering upon it, for I feel sure that what strength is needed will be given me.”

And what was Effie’s plan ? Simply to give, under her own roof, a home for the suffering months or years that remained to them, to four women, chosen from among the poor “in-

curables" who were excluded from the wards of the public hospital, to make room for those whose maladies were less hopeless. She had arranged it all in her own mind before she consulted Laurence—how a door of communication should be opened between her father's room and the large airy one adjoining it—how a trustworthy person, accustomed to regular nursing, should be hired to assist herself and Mary Wilson in their daily and nightly labour, and Mrs Randall only take such an occasional share as her health might permit.

But Grahame's concurrence and aid (as well as that of his father) were very important in such an undertaking; and though she had little fear of his ultimately refusing her anything, Effie was relieved to find him less opposed to the plan than she had expected.

The telling Aunt Jane was less difficult. She was so accustomed to think that everything Effie did must of necessity be right, that, although startled at first, she soon ceased to oppose the project when she found that Laurence considered it practicable.

Not many weeks later, three of the pretty white beds, that tender hands had prepared with such skill and care, were occupied: two by poor girls in almost the last distressing stage of consumption, and a third (in the adjoining room) by a middle-aged woman, whose limbs were hopelessly crippled by rheumatic fever, and whose miserable home afforded none of those comforts which, under such circumstances, alone could make suffering life endurable.

But who was to occupy the fourth bed? For some time it remained in doubt, for persons suffering from infectious maladies were necessarily excluded from so small an amateur hospital, and exactly the right person had never been found.

At last, one cold dismal day in autumn, "Long Tom" made his appearance at the door of Rosecroft, carrying in his arms something which at first looked like a mere bundle of ragged shawls, but which proved, on investigation, to be a tiny child, with a wizen, unchild-like face, all puckered and drawn with suffering.

She had big mournful wistful eyes, and they lighted unto something like hope as Effie's kind face bent over her.

“Poor little thing! Who is she, Tom? And what is the matter with her?”

“Don't send me away,” said the child, holding out a pair of small wasted arms; while “Long Tom,” supporting his little burden against one shoulder, raised his cap, and explained to Miss Bramstone that the “little wench” was the child of a neighbour of his, a very poor widow, scarcely able, by hard work, to obtain bread for herself and her seven other healthy children; that Bessie, although so small, was almost eight years old; and during the last three of her poor little life, had lain constantly on a little hard comfortless couch, her spine having been irrevocably injured by a fall down some stone steps.

“I told her mother how good you was, Miss,” continued the honest fellow, looking down with rough pity at the pale pinched face that rested against his strong arm; “and how maybe as you wouldn't be against doing something for the

little 'un, if you knowed how bad she was. But she said she'd never been used to asking ; and so—as Bessie seemed just pining away, like—‘Why,’ I said to her mother, ‘just give me the little lass, and I’ll take and carry her up to the good doctor’s ladies, he always loved little ‘uns, the doctor did’”—

“You were quite right, Tom,” Effie interrupted, gently ; “stay a minute.”

She went to the door, and called Mary Wilson. The latter flushed up crimson, as she always did at sight of the navvy, who had been the only witness, besides her gentle mistresses, of her frenzied attempt at self-destruction.

“See, Mary,” said Effie, as she tenderly uncovered the face of the suffering child, “here is the occupant of our fourth bed. Will you take care of her, and try to make her comfortable ? Poor wee thing ! her life has been a very suffering one, but we may be able to do her good.” Effie’s quick instinct had touched the right chord.

The aching void which for years had existed in the bereaved mother’s heart, seemed to be

once more partially filled as she looked on the face of the sick child, which, in its wan and shrunken appearance, recalled her own dying babe. Quickly and skilfully she lifted her, taking care not to jar the nerves of the small suffering frame, and soon little Bessie was lying happily on her comfortable couch, more free from pain than she could remember to have been for many a weary day.

She was always known as Mary Wilson's own especial patient, and soon the child's spirits began to revive in the tender soothing atmosphere; and her fellow-sufferer in the same room was cheered by hearing her prattling almost merrily to her kind nurse.

Seven years passed away—years which brought with them their changes of life and death; for almost during each one the dread messenger had stood at Effie's door, and some one of those on whom her tender care had been bestowed, had passed to her last account. Yet even death seemed divested of some of his terrors, when Effie's hand was near to soothe the pain she could not cure, and Effie's voice to

echo the clergyman's words of peace to the departing spirit.

All her first patients had passed away, all except little Bessie, who, to her nurse's inexpressible joy, lived on, and although always helpless, was at times free from pain, and able to feel something like enjoyment of life. How, in the meantime, had these seven years passed for Harold Leigh and his wife ?

Alas ! time had only served to strengthen the estrangement which, at her first visit, Effie had vainly tried *not* to suspect. So shallow and selfish a nature as that of Blanche could not long retain its hold over her warm-hearted, though weak and impetuous, husband.

He grew weary of the home which never gave him a cheerful welcome ; and but for the society of his little daughter, would perhaps have seldom entered its walls. But Eva was the one tie which bound him to anything good and pure, and for her sake he bore patiently, and generally uncomplainingly, with her mother's variable temper and frivolous habits of extravagance. But his old gay spirit seemed

altogether a thing of the past, and he came to be talked of in the regiment as "poor Leigh," and pitied as a man who has sorely miscalculated his own happiness. Several times during these seven years Effie had paid her cousins a short visit, and rejoiced over the growth and beauty of her little godchild.

Almost all awkwardness between them had passed away—they met as dear and intimate friends; but somehow Harold shrank from visiting his cousin beneath her own roof, and neither he nor his wife had ever crossed the old wooden bridge. At last one evening—it was the summer of 1855, the year that saw so many homes made desolate by partings—Mary Wilson came to tell her mistress that a gentleman—a stranger to her—was waiting in the drawing-room. He had not asked for Mrs Randall, only for Miss Effie, and Mary looked half affronted at a stranger's having ventured to use the loved Christian name.

"It is probably that friend of Mr Grahame's," Effie answered, smiling at her handmaid's indignation.

“I believe he is an odd absent sort of man, and he has heard his old friend call me Effie, and forgot that I had any other name. I will go down to him.”

She lingered to give a few directions to Mary about the invalids, in case she were detained longer than she expected, ran down to the drawing-room, and met the outstretched hand of Harold Leigh. Startled for a moment out of her usual self-possession, Effie could hardly find voice to speak her greeting ; but Harold, though looking very pale, was more composed, and his face had something more of the old resolute spirit than it had worn for many a year.

“I am on my way to Southampton, to join my regiment,” he said, in a low quiet voice. “We are under immediate sailing orders for the East : but I—I could not go without saying good-bye to you, Effie—my kind sister, and my child’s friend.”

“It is so good of you to have come, dear Harold,” she answered, looking up at him, and secretly grieving over his worn and aged appear-

ance, "very good. And it is kind in Blanche to have spared you to us, on your last day too."

"One day or twenty make little difference," he answered, bitterly ; then checking himself, he asked for Aunt Jane, and explained that he had an hour to spare before catching his train at Grayford. Effie hurried away to call her aunt, and during her absence, Laurence Grahame came in, to pay his usual visit to his poor patients up-stairs.

He had not met his old comrade since his marriage ; and their last interview (which had ever remained a secret from Effie) had been of no harmonious nature.

Both started violently—the young surgeon drew back in doubt what course to pursue ; but Harold rose, walked to meet him, and held out his hand.

"How are you, Grahame ?" he asked ; and as the other met his grasp somewhat unwillingly, he added, in a very low hurried voice—"When we last met, you told me that I was a scoundrel, and that my conduct would bring a curse upon

my future life. I had no words to defend myself then—I have none now. Your prophecy has come true—God knows how fully; I have been a miserable care-stricken man."

Sadly, and almost compassionately, while wondering at his strange address, Laurence Grahame surveyed his old companion, and thought of the contrast between the worn-looking man before him, and the handsome buoyant-spirited Harold Leigh of thirteen years ago.

Then too he thought of himself, of his hard-worked unjoyous life—his unrequited love, and frequent cares and disappointments, and felt how far happier was even his lot, than that of the man who, though younger than himself, bore in his face such a tale of wasted life and hopes thrown away. While they thus stood face to face, all feelings of resentment died out of Laurence's heart, and in their stead, arose a great pity for his once envied rival.

But while he was still in doubt how to speak, Effie returned with her aunt, and the opportunity was lost.

Even Aunt Jane could forgive her nephew

his long-standing crime, and return to some of the old motherly feeling for the “boy” she had loved, when she saw how at thirty-two, his face had the care-worn look of middle-age, and there were gray lines mingling with the curling hair of which she used to be so proud.

She asked after her little great-niece, and even brought herself to mention “Mrs Leigh;” and Harold, poor fellow, seemed grateful for the attention, as he answered that both were well, and then spoke of his little daughter with an affection which went far to restoring him to a place in Aunt Jane’s heart.

Presently Laurence rose, and said he would visit the poor invalids, and Effie followed to hear his report. When she returned, she said that Grahame had been summoned away in urgent haste to an old invalid gentleman in the town, and that he had charged her to deliver his adieu and good wishes to his old acquaintance.

“Though I am not a doctor, may I not visit these charges of yours, Effie?” her cousin asked. “I should like to take away with me a last im-

pression of the work to which your life is devoted."

She hesitated—

"I fear it would only sadden you, dear Harold; they are so very ill and suffering—all, that is, except Bessie, and she is always cheerful and bright, although so helpless. Still, if you like to come, the sight of a fresh face, and a few kind words of sympathy, do the poor things good"—

"Let me come," Harold interrupted; and she rose in silence, and conducted him up-stairs.

"My old room!" he exclaimed half aloud, as she opened the door of the outer ward, and motioning him to tread lightly, led the way into the cool quiet apartment.

The window was open, and through the shady venetian blinds, admitted the soft summer breeze, and the rich fragrance of the magnolia blossoms on the wall. On either side stood the white curtained beds, whence, propped on pillows, two pale wan faces looked out at the intruder, and lighted into something approaching a smile at the sound of Miss Effie's voice.

By the side of each was placed a little table, on which stood a vase of fresh roses, a plate of cool tempting fruit, and a few books printed in large type, of which the dim eyes could read a word or two from time to time, without fatigue.

Touched, and at the same time awe-stricken at finding himself in the presence of fellow-beings who seemed hovering at the very portals of that death which it is a soldier's creed to meet familiarly, Harold could hardly find voice to say more than a kind word or two to each sufferer, and felt relieved when Effie proposed to conduct him to the next room, where lay Bessie and another woman, who, though not likely to recover, was in less immediate danger than these two.

Almost mechanically, as he was quitting the room, Captain Leigh murmured a hope that the poor invalids he was leaving might get better.

"It isn't likely, sir," answered the woman nearest the door, her large patient eyes lighting up for a moment as she fixed them upon his face. "Oh no! neither Susan here, nor I, are

likely to be ever any better until we've passed the dark river, and got safely through the golden gates. But I think we've come to know a little bit what heaven is made of even here, since we've known Miss Effie. The angels must be like her, if they are as good and loving as the Bible says."

"Hush, Margaret," Effie said, gently, taking her hand. "You must not talk too much, and tire yourself. Mary shall come and sit with you now ; and she will go on reading, if you will try to keep very quiet."

She then took her cousin to see the weak and helpless, but always cheerful little Bessie, who was greatly pleased to entertain so grand a visitor ; and after a few kind words to her and her companion, Effie suggested that Aunt Jane would be disappointed to lose so much of Harold's short visit.

"One moment," he said, as they descended the stairs ; "I must see my dear old uncle's study. Is it as he left it ?"

"Yes ; scarcely a book or manuscript has been moved—come in ;" and she opened the

door and led him into the little sunny room, with its long rows of huge folios and neatly-arranged piles of papers, amongst which he could almost fancy the spirit of the gentle old doctor still hovering.

“Dear old room! My best and happiest hours were passed here. Shall I ever see my kind old guardian again, I wonder?”

There was inexpressible doubt and sadness in the tone; and much pained, Effie drew nearer to her cousin, and laid her hand upon his arm.

“Dear Harold, yes! in God’s good time. It is my greatest comfort to think that my dear father is even now waiting for us in the land of peace and rest.”

“For you! yes! and such as you. But for me—do you know what a heathen I have been, Effie? Do you know that since I left these walls thirteen years ago, I have scarce opened a Bible, or breathed a prayer? A soldier who owned to being afraid of anything, would be accounted, justly accounted, a coward; and yet how can such a one as I help feeling a vague horrible dread at the thought of death? Effie,

Effie! pray for me—pray that all may be forgiven, and that I may see you and your father once more. My little Eva, baby as she is, knows something of these things. God knows how she learned, for it was scarcely from her poor mother or from me; but yet I think her child-like innocence has been my safeguard in many a darkened hour. Heaven bless and keep the child and—and—her mother. Effie, my sister-friend, will you be good to them if I fall?"

"You know I will," she answered, in a voice choked with feeling. "Trust me, dear brother. They shall never need a friend while Aunt Jane and I are alive. But," she added, trying to speak cheerfully, "why cherish such dark thoughts? By God's blessing you will come back to them alive and safe."

He shook his head.

"We will not talk of it, Effie. I am not superstitious generally—no believer in presentiments; but *now* the thought is constantly in my mind that this farewell will be my last. Never mind; I am not worth grieving for, dear. Little Eva is too young, thank heaven, to feel

any sorrow deeply. And Blanche, poor Blanche! Well, I daresay it is best for us that we have not the ordering of our own destinies. But time presses; give me some little memento of you and my dear old uncle to take with me, and I must go."

"Will you have this?" Effie asked, timidly, and putting into his hand a little old-fashioned prayer-book, with silver clasps, which had been her father's gift to her many years ago, and contained the names of both. "My father was very fond of it. Don't you remember how he would go on using it, even after the print began to hurt his eyes?"

Harold nodded, and silently put the book into his pocket.

"God bless you, Effie," he said, fervently. "Pray for me, that death, when it comes, may not—may not— Such prayers as yours *must* be heard. Farewell now: I need not say, remember your promise."

He held her hand in a gripe that would have been absolute bodily pain, had she at that moment had a thought to bestow on herself.

He then hurried to the drawing-room, and took a hasty farewell of Aunt Jane, who, bewildered with the suddenness of the whole thing, scarcely realised that her once adored nephew was leaving her to encounter danger, perhaps death, until it was too late to say another word of tenderness or of God-speed.

When she did at last understand it, her grief was so passionate and inconsolable, that Effie, in trying to soothe her, was for the time prevented from dwelling on her own anxiety. And yet, more and more firmly did the idea fix itself in her mind, that her cousin's presentiments would come true, and that she had seen his face for the last time.

Weeks and months passed by: the Virginia-creeper leaves glowed red upon the porch, and the roses and strawberries in the poor invalids' rooms were replaced by many-hued geraniums and bunches of white and purple grapes. The harvest stores were gathered in, and the river flowed swifter between its banks, now that it was swollen with the autumnal rains. The September days had almost passed away, when

one morning a stranger knocked at the door of Rosecroft, and sent up his card, with a request that he might speak to Miss Bramstone immediately.

“The Rev. Philip Grenville” was a name unknown to Effie, but she concluded that he had come on some charitable mission, probably with the request that it cost her an almost daily heart-ache to be obliged to refuse—that she would admit some poor dying creature into her (already filled) little hospital.

In the drawing-room she found a grave-looking middle-aged man, who rose to greet her with evident signs of embarrassment.

All was, however, explained, when he said, after some hesitation—

“I believe you are acquainted with (at least by name) my brother-in-law, Edward Mortoun.”

Effie started. All was plain now. The name was that of the Major of Harold’s regiment, who, as she well knew, was one of the latter’s most intimate friends. She grew so pale that her visitor started up in alarm; but, recovering her own quiet self-command, she said slowly, “You have

brought me news of my cousin. You are come to tell me that he has fallen, have you not?"

Mr Grenville bowed his head in answer, and both were silent for some moments.

Then Effie said, calmly, "Will you please tell me how and when it was?"

"Let me first give you this," he answered, putting into her hands a small parcel, which she instinctively guessed to contain the prayer-book that had been her last gift to poor Harold.

"I have my brother-in-law's letter with me," continued the clergyman; "at least a copy of that part which relates to your cousin. Perhaps you would prefer reading for yourself."

And Effie read—

"We have lost one of our best and most gallant officers—perhaps *the* one, who, out of the whole regiment, I would least willingly have spared. I think you have heard me speak of him—poor Leigh, who married old Maitland's beautiful daughter. He fell in the moment of victory, while cheering his men forward to the taking of the great redoubt, shot through the heart. He died without a struggle, so a ser-

geant tells me, who was near, and saw him fall ; and when I visited him after death, the features seemed to have settled into a smile of such beauty and peace, as, poor fellow, reminded me of his boyish days, when he first joined our regiment. A braver, handsomer, more hopeful young fellow than he was then, I have seldom seen. Of later years there has seemed to be some shadow across his life. He seldom cared to talk of his wife, but I fancy she was not in every respect a helpmate to him. However, the night before the battle he came to my tent, and, speaking in a half-jesting manner of some presentiment which had been haunting him, that his first day in action would be his last, he gave into my care a letter, to be delivered to his wife in the event of his fall, and also a small prayer-book, which he wished to have returned to his cousin, whose name I should find written on the fly-leaf. I have noticed that this book was his constant companion ; and I think it may be some consolation to Miss Bramstone (whom I know he regarded as a sister) to learn how much comfort it afforded him in those fits of

depression to which, poor fellow, he has of late years been subject."

Effie's tears—the tears which, in the day of her own bitter desertion, would not come to her relief—were now dropping fast, as with a softened grief she thought of that far-off grave in a foreign land, where the bright head lay low, and the gallant form was at rest.

She was very thankful now for the memory of that last interview, sad though it was, but not from the sadness without hope.

"Have you seen his wife?" she presently asked, as the promise then made to Harold flashed across her mind.

Mr Grenville shook his head.

"I asked my sister, Mrs Mortoun (the major's wife), to go to her, and to break the news. She is with her still; in fact, Emily describes poor Mrs Leigh as in no condition to be left alone. Her grief is wild and despairing, mingled with bursts of passionate self-reproach for her neglect of her husband during his life. I fear she may have too much cause for such regrets."

"She was so beautiful. It was the fault in

great measure of her education, that she was not more helpful and more practical," said Effie, the instinct of generous loyalty to Harold's memory making her eager to defend his wife. "Poor, poor thing! And that dear little Eva—Harold's darling she always was. Oh, that I could go to them!"

"And you cannot?" the clergyman asked, regretfully. "I feared it might be so." Effie shook her head.

"I must not. My aunt's health is failing, and I must not throw on her the burden of my self-imposed duties here. But if she could come to me?"

"Could you take her in, and her child, if she were willing to come?" Mr Grenville asked. A moment's consideration showed Effie how, with contrivance, it could be managed, without interfering with Aunt Jane's comfort.

"Yes, oh yes! so gladly, if she will come."

"It is asking a good deal of you, I fear, when your claims are already so numerous," said Mr Grenville, doubtfully. "Has your poor cousin's

widow no relatives of her own, to whom, in such a moment, she can apply?"

"I fear not," Effie answered. "Her father has never consented to see her since her marriage, and he is now grown very old and almost childish, and is, Blanche has told me, entirely governed by his second wife. I know that poor Harold hoped that a reconciliation might be brought about when little Eva was born, but they have never taken any notice of her, and Blanche says that Mrs Maitland particularly dislikes young children."

"Then I see no course that the poor woman can adopt, except to take advantage of your kind offer. I will write to my sister, and ask her to remain with Mrs Leigh until she is able to travel."

A few days more saw Blanche Leigh and her fatherless child under the roof which had sheltered Harold's boyhood.

Aunt Jane bestowed on little Eva the tenderness which, in bygone years, had been reserved for her godmother; and Effie, while feeling the difficulty of combining all her various avoca-

tions, tried her utmost to soothe the wild passionate grief which, in a mind so utterly undisciplined as that of Blanche, was hard to deal with.

Yet the widow's sorrow was short in proportion to its violence. Ere many months were over she was beginning to enjoy the benefits of her recovered freedom, and the year had scarcely passed before she was married again to one of her husband's brother-officers, and her own devoted admirer in the girlish days long since gone by.

And so the hardest part of Effie's task was done, but she had still one link to bind her to the past, and, if it had been needed, to keep Harold's memory ever fresh in her mind.

When Blanche sailed for India, shortly after her second marriage, little Eva was left behind in her godmother's charge. It was a happy and a sweet companionship for both, and the child's bright spirit, like a brilliant flower in some shady nook, seemed to shine with redoubled lustre in that quiet house, which had been so long the abode of patient suffering.

One more picture—for this tale aspires to be no more than a series of sketches, more or less darkly pencilled—and we have done. Two women—one in the first opening blush of girlhood's freshness and beauty, the other verging on middle-age, yet with a look in those soft dark eyes as if they could *reflect* brightness, although their own sunshine has long since passed away—are standing on the wooden bridge, which was the scene of our opening chapter.

It is a summer night, warm and balmy, but the gusts of soft west wind are hurrying the clouds across the sky.

One moment it is so dark that they can hardly distinguish the river from the banks between which it flows ; the next, the harvest moon shines out bright and clear, a globe of pure steady light, while in the waters beneath its reflection shimmers and changes, and spreads into a thousand silvery sparkles.

“ How beautiful ! ” the girl murmurs, as the soft night air fans her cheek, and she gazes up at the glorious orb of light, now escaped from

the clouds, and shining resplendent in the deep blue vault.

“And look at the river, Aunt Effie ! See how the light sparkles and changes with every movement of the water !”

“Do you know what it is most like, Eva ?” the elder woman asks, while her thoughts travel backward over the space of twenty years, when she, too, in her bright girlhood, stood on that self-same spot, and beside her one who now sleeps on the green shores of the Bosphorus.

“Tell me, Aunt Effie.”

“It is like the most beautiful thing that exists in heaven and in earth. It is like love, my Eva. Love in heaven, pure, steadfast, glorious ; love on earth—the reflection of what the angels feel—weak, changeful, faint in comparison, yet beautiful still, shining forth in silver brightness, through the dark flood of earthly sin and earthly woe !”



THE VILLAGE BLACKSMITH.

A TALE OF CHRISTMAS.



P A R T I.

“ Under the spreading chestnut tree
The village smithy stands ;
The smith, a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands,
And the muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands.

“ His hair is crisp, and black, and long,
His face is like the tan ;
His brow is wet with honest sweat,
He earns whate'er he can,
And looks the whole world in the face,
For he owes not any man.”

—LONGFELLOW.

THE chestnut tree of Charlton-Stoke was the pride of all the country round. No one knew exactly how old it was, or who had planted it ; but one thing was certain, that not the oldest person in the parish could remember it as otherwise than a mighty giant ; and a tradition existed, that it had been the same when the grandfather of John Frost, the black-

smith (beside whose cottage it stood), had been a little village lad.

It was a winter evening—clear and cold, with a frosty feeling in the air, although the ground was not hard—the beams of the setting sun threw a ruddy glow over the trunk and branches of the old tree, and on the black crisp curls and bronzed face of the present John Frost, as he stood, shading his eyes with his hand, to look up the village street, and listening to the bells as they merrily announced the approaching Christmas tide. It wanted yet a week to Christmas, but the ringers were practising, in hopes of improving their peal.

John Frost had struck work earlier than usual this evening, and abandoned the sledge-hammer to his apprentice William, who, with all his efforts, could not produce the same volume of sound and continual shower of sparks as did his master's mighty hands when wielding their accustomed weapon. It was not usual for John to be so idle, or to stand doing nothing on a cold December evening; but yet there he remained, straining his eyes up the road, as it

seemed, in vain, since no living creature was visible except Farmer Wilson's cows, slowly being driven back from milking.

Yes! there was a footstep, but it came from the wrong direction; it was only the young clergyman returning from his daily round.

"Good evening to you, Frost. One does not often find you outside your shop door so early."

John touched his cap, and something like a blush was visible on his swarthy cheek.

"Not often, sir, as you say. And I believe I was a bit foolish to give up so soon to-day; but I"—

"There," laughed the vicar, kindly, "you need not stammer and make excuses. We all know of your good luck, John, and all wish you joy of it. There certainly is not a prettier girl in the parish, nor, to my belief, a better one. I suppose you 'll be needing my services one of these days?"

"Well, sir," said John, looking inexpressibly happy and sheepish, "things are not just come to that yet; but when I can get Ruth to consent"—

“Why, then, be sure you let me know. I shall be ready,” and with the clear genial laugh that endeared him to his parishioners, almost as much as his kind heart and excellent teaching, Mr Freeman passed on. Perhaps John’s meditations, when he was left alone, would, if put into words, have been something like the following :—

“Good luck! Ay—I believe I am the luckiest chap in the world, to have won such a sweet little creature’s love. She who might be a born lady—that makes even her young mistresses—bless their kind hearts—look plain beside her; *she* to condescend to a great rough fellow like me, with nothing to offer her but an honest man’s love, and a pair of strong arms to defend her against the world. God bless her for it! She shan’t repent her trust. I’ll be the best of husbands, and she shall be the happiest little woman”—

Tramp, tramp! Tramp, tramp! and round the corner of the high road came two young men on horseback, in splashed hunting-coats and tops.

“Hulloa, Frost, good evening!” cried a gay voice. “I am sadly afraid we are in for a long spell of your namesake. And, hang it! the best meet of the season fixed for Tuesday. Well, it may break before then, so I'll send ‘Black Minnie’ down to you in the morning. Here's my friend, Mr Carrington, come down to spend Christmas at the Hall, who is a first-flight man in Leicestershire.”

“‘Black Minnie’s’ the horse to carry him, then, sir. There isn't her match in the county.”

“Ay,” said the young squire, “Mr Carrington doubts her being up to his weight; but I tell him that blood is better than bone. Breeding's the thing to tell, depend upon it.”

“One feels that every day, especially where human nature is concerned,” observed the stranger, as he surveyed John Frost's brawny muscles and breadth of limb, and then carelessly glanced at his own gloved hand, long and slight as a woman's. He was a dark-eyed handsome man, of tall though slender build, and looked a year or two older than the young squire.

“Come,” said the latter, apparently not quite liking something in his friend’s tone, “we must jog on, or the horses will get chilled. Good evening, John. Ah, by the by, you’re a lucky fellow. I think little Ruth grows prettier every day. You’ll have to wait a bit for her, though, for I don’t know when my sisters will make up their minds to part with her. Come, Carrington,” and off trotted the two hunters, leaving John still watching under the chestnut tree.

“Is *that* the fellow who is going to marry the lovely little girl I met coming out of your sisters’ room?” inquired Carrington, as soon as they were out of hearing. “My dear Edmund, it is a sin and shame to waste such a fairy on a mere village clod. Vulcan and Venus were a joke to it.”

“There isn’t a better fellow, or a nobler heart, in England,” cried Edmund Winthrop, impetuously. “You London-bred men are no judges of village worth. I look upon Frost as one of ‘Nature’s gentlemen’—one who would do honour to any station in which he chanced to be placed. And so far from being wasted, Ruth is in great

luck to have secured such a protector. Little beauty as she is, the responsibility of looking after the motherless thing would soon have become too much for my sisters, who, with the best will in the world, could hardly have warded off all danger from her."

Lower and lower sank the evening sun, and still John Frost stood patient at his post. His patience was rewarded at last. A little figure came tripping down the street, beneath whose straw bonnet appeared a lovely face—not red and buxom, according to the received idea of village beauty, but delicately fair—almost child-like in feature, yet with a woman's thought in the deep blue eyes and open brow.

Eagerly John strode forward to meet her, and caught the two little hands she willingly yielded to him in his great palm, holding them as tenderly as if they had been a little bird which he feared to crush in his rude strength.

"My little Ruth," he murmured; and a robin, that had settled in the branches above them, trilled its evening note as if in harmony with the scene. Neither spoke again for a few moments,

until the distant sound of the church clock striking made Ruth start.

“I mustn’t stay a minute, John ; there is a great dinner-party up at the Hall to-night, and I must be back to dress my young ladies, and give a helping hand to Miss Carrington too, for her maid is laid up with a bad cold.”

“Miss Carrington,” repeated John ; “is that a sister of the gentleman as rode by with Mr Edmund this evening ?”

“Yes; but she is not like him. Much younger, and so sweet-spoken and pleasant. Do you know, John—’tis a secret, mind—but I never saw Mr Edmund so took up with any one yet ; and the squire, too, makes a wonderful deal of her!”

“How do the young ladies take to her ?”

“Oh, very well : in fact, she and Miss Violet are great friends already. And Miss Grace—O John ! they do say that Mr Carrington is making up to Miss Grace ; but I hope it isn’t true, for I cannot bear the looks of him.”

“I should think not,” muttered John, fiercely, for he had not forgotten the supercilious glance bestowed upon himself. “I should think not,

my little precious Ruth ; but Miss Grace doesn't fancy him, I hope. He isn't fit to kiss the ground she treads on."

"I can't tell, John. Miss Grace had always strange fancies, and would take up with many a one that nobody else could speak a good word for. I don't mean in the way of lovers, though ; for she frightens them away quick enough generally. But Mr Carrington isn't a Jew, is he, John ? I heard the young squire tell his father that he belonged to the Inner Temple ; and he has such a long nose, and such keen dark eyes, that seem to look right through one."

"It would puzzle anybody to see through *him*, I fancy," observed John. "No, Ruthie, he isn't a Jew, but he's the next thing to one,—a lawyer down from London. But, Ruth, darling, instead of gossiping about our betters' affairs, we should be much wiser to think a bit about our own. When am I to have my little woman with me always ? 'Twas a terrible dreary time when you were away with the family in London, and even now it isn't much better ; for you are busy all day, and so am I, and a few minutes

snatched now and then is all we can see of one another. When is my little bird coming home to her own nest? 'Tis but a humble one, but I have done my best to make it cosy for her."

"O John!"—and the fair face was suffused with blushes that only made it prettier and more like a rosebud than ever—"O John! I can't tell. You see I cannot leave the young ladies till they are suited. They were my first friends."

"Not before me, Ruth! Why, don't I remember your poor mother (when you were a wee toddling thing that could not speak plain) putting you into my arms, and bidding me be a big brother to you always. I think I loved you from that time, Ruthie; you were such a pretty baby, and you would cling round my neck with your little arms, and call me, 'Nice good John,' and make me lift you up to gather the chestnuts off this very tree."

"Ah, yes," said Ruth, thoughtfully, "I was a happy child, although an orphan so early: every one was good to me,—the schoolmistress, the other children, the squire's lady, and, after she died, my dear young mistresses. I seem

never to have known trouble or care, John. Sometimes I'm afraid that I lead a very useless easy life."

"Are the flowers useless, then, Ruth, because as the Bible says, 'they toil not, neither do they spin,' but just grow quietly in the place where God puts them, and shed their beauty and their sweetness around? Is yonder robin's life an idle one, because he does but twitter his little notes, and then fold his wings and sleep, knowing that the God who made him requires of him no work? Then believe that there may be other fair things on this earth of ours of whom no rough labour is required; at least, while there are strong hands and willing hearts to work for them. But, darling, I must not keep you lingering here, or those little feet will be benighted. Think it over, Ruthie, and next time we meet, tell me when I am to be blest with my home's sunshine. God bless thee;" and the little woman stood on tiptoe to receive his parting kiss, which no *preux chevalier* of the days of romance could have offered with more tender reverential devotion.

It was late—all the guests from a distance had left the Hall, but still the party in the house lingered round the fire, unwilling to leave its cheerful blaze, and bring their pleasant evening to a close. Violet, the youngest child of the house, and the squire's darling, was hanging her golden curls over her father's great arm-chair, as he sat in front of the blazing yule-log. The light fell in ruddy flickering gleams on the darker hair and more thoughtful countenance of her sister, as she looked upwards into the handsome cynical face of Mr Carrington. He was talking (as Grace fondly believed he loved to talk) in low gentle whispers, meant for her ear alone. She did not like all that he said—some of it offended her taste, much more her judgment; but his was the most masterly mind, the clearest intellect that had ever come within her sphere, and, woman-like, she had placed him on her pedestal of hero-worship, and eagerly drank in the sweet poison of his words. A little apart, and conversing less fluently, but with more of heart in all they said, sat the young squire and Ada Carrington. She had divined

his secret—she knew well that a word or look would bring the warm-hearted lad to her feet ; but she was her brother's willing slave, and till he should give permission, young Edmund's suit was hopeless.

Yet Ada's life had not been a happy one, and there were, not one, but many loving hearts open to her. The squire's manner was already almost fatherly in its kindness ; and Grace and Violet were ready to give her a sister's welcome. But Ada was true to her colours: "Alfred" was still all the world to her—his judgment wholly immaculate, and he had hitherto given no answer to her timid appeal on the subject of young Winthrop's increasing attentions.

Still, while he was so apparently devoted to Grace, his sister could not believe that she was really displeasing him by allowing herself to feel a daily and hourly pleasure in Edmund's society ; and the squire already rubbed his hands in secret, and chuckled gleefully over the two impending weddings.

But Violet had her doubts. Was this man, of whom they knew nothing, save that his

fortune was large, his family good, and his manners super-eminently agreeable, the long-prophesied lover who was to find favour with her sister Grace? Grace, the fastidious, the proud, who had hitherto repulsed every admirer, and remained heart-whole whilst breaking the hearts of others? He *might* be worthy of her, and yet—Violet doubted. Hers was a simpler nature than her sister's, a more child-like mind, and to her Mr Carrington was simply a worldly-wise, coldly-selfish man. She disliked his cynicism and his satire. His contemptuous condescension towards women, even blended as it was with the most polished courtesy, irritated and angered her; and, while acknowledging his cleverness, she often thought his arguments shallow. “But perhaps,” thought humble-minded Violet to herself, “all this may be only my own want of appreciation. If Gracie admires him—Gracie, so much cleverer and brighter than I—there must be more in him than I think.” Ah, Violet! you little know the potency of those musical tones, the impressiveness of those well-chosen words!

“ Well,” said the squire’s hearty voice, breaking upon a long discussion about some tableaux that were projected for the following week, “ haven’t you come to a decision yet? Come, you must reserve it for to-morrow morning. It is getting on to any hour. Miss Carrington, my dear, I am partial to roses, and especially Christmas roses, and I don’t like to see yours fading. Edmund, persuade her to have some wine, and then light her candle.”

“ We are going, papa,” said Grace, standing up and giving her hand to Mr Carrington as she said “ good-night.” Did any one besides the anxious sister notice the lingering pressure it received, or the heightened colour that rose to the fair cheek?

“ Violet,” she said, a little while later, when the sisters were alone in the room they shared together, “ do you think Mr Carrington is right?”

“ About what, dearest?”

“ About Ruth. He is so struck with her style of beauty and refined appearance. He says that many a high-born lady might wish for it in

vain. He thinks it is a pity that she was not brought up to be a governess or companion, and so placed in a higher sphere than she is likely to occupy as honest Frost's wife."

"Does he call a state of helpless dependence a higher sphere than that of honest poverty? Or does he think that Ruth would be happier as a slave to some fine lady's caprices, than as John Frost's cherished wife? O Gracie! you could not surely listen for a moment to such reasoning. Besides, there is one point Mr Carrington seems to have lost sight of altogether, and which, in my opinion, ought to set the matter at rest—they love each other!"

"But even that," and Grace smiled a little at her sister's simple argument, "even that does not settle the question of their fitness to spend a lifetime together. If Ruth is really so much above him in refinement and in education—for remember, Violet, that to us she has been rather a friend than servant—may she not some day have a painful awakening to her own superiority?"

"I doubt it. Rough though he may be in

exterior, John Frost is no common man in mind. Ask Edmund, and he will tell you that Frost is the most constant attendant at his new reading-room, and that his choice of books is by no means of the lowest order. Besides, his language is often far superior to that of most of the same class. O Grace! have no fear for our little friend. Who that looked in John Frost's face, and met his open fearless gaze, could doubt his being good and true, gentle and brave, a pillar of strength for any weaker nature to lean upon! Do not let Mr Carrington make you see with his eyes, but trust only to your own clear, firm judgment, which has so often guided mine. But, sister, darling, it is getting very late, and I really must shut my eyes, or I shall be arguing all night in my dreams."

"Well, John," said the groom (who, two days after Christmas, had brought down some of the squire's horses to be shod), "why didn't you come up to the Hall last night, to have a peep at the 'thayatricals?' Your little sweetheart could have contrived to get you in, I should

think. Take care with that near foot of 'Sir Brian's;' he's been going a bit tender on it lately."

"I had thought of stepping up," said John, stroking the horse's shoulder before taking possession of the foot; "but I'm too big a chap to be smuggled in, and I didn't want to be in Ruth's way when she was busy helping the young ladies. I suppose there was very grand doings?"

"Ay, splendid. 'Twasn't acting, you know, exactly; but they was dressed up to look like pictures. Miss Grace and Mr Carrington had one all to themselves, and did it beautiful. He was a robber-captain what had got into trouble, and she was a Turkish lady come to rescue him. Miss Grace did look handsome, to be sure! And I think she liked that the best of all the parts she played, and I daresay Mr Carrington did too. Well, he's a good-looking chap, certainly, and a good man across country; but I would rather Miss Grace should marry our vicar."

"*That's* not likely, I'm afraid," observed

John. "Hold up, Brian, my lad! How long do Mr Carrington and his sister stop at the Hall?"

"A good bit longer, I hear. There's no doubt about Mr Edmund being sweet upon the young lady, and the squire seems willing enough. But Miss Grace is another matter. But I must get back with these horses, for the carriage may be wanted."

•
"John!—O John!"

"Why, my little Ruth, my white snowdrop! I don't often look for the luck of seeing you out so early! But what is it, darling? you are trembling like a leaf.

"O John, John! Mr Carrington"—

"That scoundrel!" And John's hand was tightly clenched as a dark suspicion crossed his mind.

"What has he *dared* to say to you, Ruthie? By heavens"—

"O John, wait!—do have patience one moment, and I'll tell you. It is nothing, really—only I do care for Miss Grace's sake. I was in the tea-room while the theatricals were going on,

getting Miss Grace's headdress ready for that scene when she was to be Guluare, the Turkish lady, when Mr Carrington came in on pretence of looking for something, and found me there alone. He said he had long been waiting for an opportunity like this to tell me how beautiful he thought me, and all nonsense of that kind. He said that he considered me worthy of a far higher station than that for which I seemed destined ; and that, if I would only care for him a little, and trust him, he would take me to London, and make my fortune, and make me a lady, and love me always. O John ! and my poor Miss Grace believing him true to her all the time ! ”

“ What did you say, Ruthie ? ”

“ I hardly know. I believe I told him he wasn't a gentleman, and ought to be ashamed of himself ; and just then I heard Mrs Evan's voice in the passage, and I ran out and stayed close by her all the evening.”

“ By the heaven above us,”—and the fierce grasp of the uplifted sledge-hammer caused the veins of the powerful wrist to start and swell,—

“if I come across that villain, I’ll kill him!”

“John—dear, dear John—don’t say such things! Think of the Christmas bells, how they go on ringing ‘peace and goodwill,’ ‘peace and goodwill;’ think of St Stephen’s day yesterday, and how *he* prayed even for the men who murdered him! Think of all the squire’s goodness to us, and Mr Edmund, and my own dear young ladies. O John, dearest, don’t give way to passion—though I love you for being angry too—I *am* very angry myself.”

“You, my little white dove! very terrible your anger must be indeed. But there, child, I won’t do anything dreadful, you need not be frightened. Only ’tis a shame that the law allows a poor man no means of defending his honour when a rich man insults it. But have you told any one up at the Hall yet?”

“No, I waited till I had seen you. O John, *must* Miss Gracie know?”

“Yes, Ruth; I do not think you can help it. It would not be right by her, even, to conceal what this man is.”

“Oh dear!” sighed poor Ruth, “that I should have brought this upon them all! Poor Mr Edmund, too; for he will never be able to marry the young lady, if he quarrels with her brother! Well, good-bye, John, dear. I know you are right; but oh! I wish you were not!”

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Great was the commotion excited at the Hall by Ruth’s timid revelation to Miss Violet. The latter, grieved as she was for her sister’s sake, could not but feel a little secret triumph at her own penetration. She had never cordially liked Mr Carrington, in spite of his agreeableness and her own love for Ada; there was something about his eyes—keen, dark, handsome as they were—that never looked one straight in the face. Grace bore the news, which her sister broke to her as tenderly as she could, with apparent calmness, almost with indifference. The only change visible was an increasing kindness and gentleness in her manner to Ruth. In the meantime, every spark of chivalry in Edmund Winthrop’s breast had been awakened by the

insult to his sister's motherless favourite, and the slight to Grace herself. He had indignantly called his friend to account, and high words had passed between them. A challenge might have followed, had not the squire, interfering, laid peremptory orders on his son to proceed no further in the matter, and requested Mr Carrington to leave his house as soon as possible. To Ada, the whole family showed a sorrowful kindness, which added to the poor girl's grief at parting ; but no possibility of an alternative seemed to occur to her. To her brother she belonged, body and soul, and by his fortunes she must be content to abide.

“One thing is clear,” said the squire, after the guests had departed, and the excitement was beginning to subside, “we must get little Ruth safely married and disposed of. She is too precious a little piece of Dresden china to run the risk of breaking, and I’ll stand the responsibility no longer. You must make your minds up to let her go. Girls! let’s see: this is the 28th. What would be the earliest day that could be fixed? It ought to be in the Christ-

mas holidays. You sound her, Violet, and let me know."

"The Epiphany would be quite the earliest day, papa, dear; and I doubt whether even then she will not be hurried, getting her dress and all ready."

However, the squire, having taken the idea into his head, would bear no delay; and for the Epiphany little Ruth's wedding was fixed. There was a slight fall of snow to welcome the New Year; but afterwards the weather grew dry and settled, and the morning of the 6th dawned bright and clear and still—altogether the perfection of a day for a winter wedding.

"I am so glad," said Violet Winthrop, as she hurried over the finishing touches of her toilet. "The sky is like Ruth's eyes, blue and clear, without the shadow of a cloud to be seen. We shall miss them terribly when she is gone."

"Nothing is worth missing," said Grace, wearily; "at least, nothing is worth fretting over when it is once gone."

What a long heavy sigh followed the words! And how aged had the fair face grown within

the few last days. In a moment Violet was kneeling at her sister's feet. "Gracie, my own Gracie! I cannot bear to see you thus. Try to think that it is indeed not worth grieving over."

"Alas! is not that thought the bitterest of all? Tell me that one I have loved is dead—that he has fallen amid duty and honour, as an Englishman should, and I could bear it; yes, and glory in the midst of grief. But tell me that he is false—degraded in the opinion of men of honour—lost in his own. O Violet, Violet! my heart will break! And yet, fool that I am! I did believe that he had for ever cured me by the explanation he deemed so satisfactory."

"And that was"—

"That he had only spoken as every man of fashion considers himself privileged to speak to a pretty country girl, and never dreamed of the little rustic flashing out so indignantly."

"And what did you answer?"

"I told him that such an explanation was an insult alike to womanhood and to me, and that I would hear no more. Then he left me; but, O Violet! just as his hand was on the door he

turned once more, and I thought I caught a softened repentant glance from those dark proud eyes. Fool! weak fool as I am, I almost called him back—almost”—the words were lost in bitter tearless sobs.

Tenderly Violet hung over and caressed her.

“Dearest Gracie, it is hard; yet we outlive these things.”

“Yes, life continues after all the sunshine has passed away, and the gray twilight begun. But there is peace in the twilight too, sometimes—calm still peace—and the night comes at last. Yes, Violet, pray for me—pray that I may have strength given to endure unto the end.”

“That is Ruth,” said Violet, starting up, as a light tap was heard at the door. “I begged her to let us see her as soon as she had on her wedding-dress.” She unlocked the door, and there, in truth, stood the little bride, in her silver gray silk (the squire’s gift), with a few half-opened snowdrops nestling in the band.

“Yes, ma’am,” she said, glowing and smiling as Violet admired them. “Aren’t they pretty? John brought them to me this morning, and

indeed it is wonderful to see how his great strong fingers could hold the little things so lightly and tenderly. He has been watching for them on the sunny bank behind his cottage for ever so many days, and was so pleased that they were in blossom for me to wear to-day."

"They are like you, Ruth," said Violet, kissing her, "fair and delicate and modest. John Frost will be a happy man with his home-flower—his little cottage snowdrop; and I doubt not that he will be as tender of her as of the tiny winter blossoms. But it is almost time for you to come to the church. Let *me* be *your* lady's-maid to-day, and fold your white shawl. No, Ruth, not a word about parting, and no tears; we must have nothing but sunshine within and without this morning."

Half an hour later the solemn vows were exchanged, and the blessing pronounced, and John Frost could claim the fair girl—little more than a child she looked beside him—as his own Heaven-bestowed treasure, to love and to guard until death. Then a pause, and every head within the crowded church was bowed in prayer

—and then a few deep organ-notes, and clear and glorious burst forth the Epiphany hymn.

Neither of the bridal pair joined in at first, but towards the end of the third verse a few notes of John Frost's deep bass were audible, and clear, though tremulous, followed Ruth's bird-like tones.

“ Holy Jesus, every day
Keep us in the narrow way,
And when earthly things are past,
Bring our ransom'd souls at last,
Where they need no star to guide,
Where no clouds Thy glory hide.

“ In the heavenly country bright,
Need they no created light ;
Thou its Light, its Joy, its Crown,
Thou its Sun which goes not down.
There for ever may we sing
Alleluias to our King.”

As the festival service proceeded, Violet's eyes often anxiously sought those of her sister, but she read in them a hope of better things.

She was right, the struggle had been made, the victory won, and for Grace a new life was from that day to begin.

But we must not linger over every hour of

that bright festal day, nor describe the glories of the wedding-dinner, or of the mighty cake which the bride's little fingers in vain endeavoured to divide.

“Much more fit it seemed,” as the squire observed, “for her husband's sledge-hammer to work upon.”

Merry was the dance in the great holly-decked hall which followed, and loud the applause when the squire himself, claiming the bride's hand for the first country dance, led her beneath the mistletoe, kissed her with his grave fatherly kindness, and assured John Frost that he was a man to be envied.

Who could guess at the aching heart which lay beneath all young Edmund's fun and gaiety?

Or rather, who that did guess it could fail to honour the brave spirit, which thus enabled both him and his sister to put self aside in the thought of others?

The evening came to a close at last, and then, amid kind words, hand-shakings, and hearty good wishes, the newly-wedded pair set

out for their homeward walk, the bride warmly wrapped up in the scarlet Galway cloak which had been the young squire's special gift.

" 'Tis a glorious night," said John, as he drew his wife's arm closer within his own, to steady her footsteps on the slippery ground. " We shall be at home in a few minutes. Ah, Ruthie! what a different home to me now! See the moon shining like silver on the fir-trees and the church spire; and yonder's our own big chestnut, you 'll see the fire through the windows presently."

" Oh! the stars, how beautiful they are," cried Ruth, who had seldom been out so late on a winter's night, " and that great, bright one yonder—look, John. What is it called? I remember you were reading a book of Mr Edmund's that told about them?"

" Ah, little wife, you mustn't ask me: I 'm a sad blockhead in some things, and those heathenish names would never stick by me, somehow. But I 'll tell you what that star seems to me, and I don't see why we shouldn't believe it too—just the one which the wise

men we heard about in church saw in the East, and which guided them to the place they were seeking. We shall never see that star without thinking of our wedding-day, shall we? But here's our cottage door, and the holly sprigs in the window to greet you, and a bright fire burning on the hearth; and so a hearty welcome to my own precious little wifie in her own home!"

PART II.

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P A R T I I.

“ Week in, week out, from morn till night,
 You can hear his bellows blow;
You can hear him swing his heavy sledge,
 With measured beat and slow,
Like a sexton ringing the village bell,
 When the evening sun is low.

“ And the children coming home from school,
 Look in at the open door,
They love to see the flaming forge,
 And hear the bellows roar,
And catch the burning sparks that fly
 Like chaff from a threshing floor.”

—LONGFELLOW

BANG, bang ! bang, bang ! Steady as clock-work fall the blows of the mighty hammer, and merrily fly the sparks from the furnace to which the apprentice applies the bellows. Eighteen years have come and gone since John Frost's wedding, and there he is at his old post in the forge beneath the chestnut

tree. Hale, hearty, and joyous as ever he looks, and but little altered, save that a few silver lines are visible here and there among the black curls, and perhaps a very few wrinkles on the bronzed, honest face.

“Almost time to leave off work, master,” observes the apprentice, watching in amazement the unvarying rise and fall of the sledge hammer, “the sun has been down a long time.”

“Yes, lad, I know it, and I’m sorry, for I meant these iron hurdles of the squire’s to have been finished first. I like to feel that each day has had its own share of work completed, and that I’ve earned my evening’s rest. But I’ll just get this one done, and then leave off for to-night.”

A patterning sound of little feet along the lane, and a party of merry children came clustering round the door.

“O Mr Frost!” cry several little voices, “are Will and Steenie gone to Miss Gracie’s party up at the Hall? There’s to be a Christmas tree, we hear, and such lots of fun.”

“They are gone on, little ones, not ten

minutes since ; and Johnnie and Mary too. Mary said she was too old she feared, but Miss Grace would have her come."

"Oh, I am so glad," says a curly-headed little girl, eagerly ; "Mary is always good to me, and she'll take care of me along the dark lane coming home."

"And Mr Frost," says a tall farm-lad, "I 'm going to bring the old mare down to you to-morrow morning to be roughed, for father says we have got your namesake among us now, and no mistake."

"Get along, you rogues," and out rings John's hearty never-failing laugh at the old oft-repeated joke, and his merriment infects the children, and away up the road they run, rejoicing in the happy prospect of Miss Grace's party. Meantime John lays aside his work, unties his blacksmith's apron, and gives a glance round to see that all is in order for the next day.

Then with a light heart, and a step little slower than that of eighteen years ago, he mounts the steps to his own cottage door.

There are the holly sprigs in the window and

over the chimneypiece, just as of old ; and there is the bright wood fire blazing and crackling, and the kettle singing on the hob ; and there, in the chimney-corner, is the slight figure and the fair face in which the husband's eyes can see no change.

Alas ! that he should mistake that hectic flush for the glow of health, that worn look for the girlish slenderness of olden days. But the face lights into a bright smile as her husband's step is heard, and the blue eyes turn towards him with all their old calm peaceful expression.

“ Oh, John dear, this is nice ! Now those noisy young things are out, we 'll have a cosy tea and evening together ! ”

“ Hard-hearted little mother,” laughs John. “ But there—wait a minute till I just make myself tidy, and fit company for such a dainty little woman, and then we 'll be just as snug as you please.”

When John came back he found his wife deep in thought, and even his approach scarcely roused her.

“ Tired, wifie ? ” he said, drawing his chair to

the fire, and gently touching her hand. "I hope I wasn't wrong in letting you go to church yesterday."

"Oh no, John. We could not have missed the Christmas service together. We never have missed it, have we? Except the year Steenie was born. And the Epiphany too, our wedding-day. I wonder if the snowdrops will be out this time. You have never yet failed to bring me some on that day, though last year it was only two tiny buds, scarcely whitening yet."

"How the children watch for mother's snowdrops! What, cold, my darling?" as a shiver ran through Ruth's frame, and she bent closer to the fire.

"No, John, no. How fast the children are growing up. Why, Mary is within a year of being as old as I was when we were married."

"Ay, Mary will be having lovers of her own soon, you'll see. A good girl is Mary, and a pretty one, but not equal to her mother, nor ever will be."

"Hush, John, dear, don't flatter your old wifie. Mary *is* a good girl, and will be a com-

fort to you—to us, I mean—I hope”—a sharp fit of coughing cut the words short. Her husband looked at her anxiously.

“I don’t like to hear that, Ruth. I must get you to see Dr Anderson to-morrow. You know, he said you must be very careful for some time, and I’m afraid he wouldn’t have approved of the church-going yesterday.”

“I don’t think that hurt me, dear. And Dr Anderson can’t do me much good. Miss Gracie’s lozenges are the best to stop the cough. I told Mary to ask her if I might have some more. Dear kind Miss Gracie! What would the sick people in the parish do without her?”

“To think that she should never have married all these years! Well, we have been the gainers, and so has Mr Edmund—the squire, I mean. I ought to have got used to calling him so, when he has been *the* squire these ten years and more.”

“Ah, John, we little thought eighteen years ago that those two would be living quietly together till now in the old place. And to see Miss Violet that was, grown such a grand

matronly lady, with all her merry children round her! How happy the sisters looked together last time she came to stay at the Hall, and how Miss Grace does love those children!"

"And the squire too; it used to make me laugh to hear him calling himself 'the old bachelor uncle.' Why, he's two years younger than I am, Ruthie, and you don't think your husband such a *very* old chap yet, do you?"

"And yet—when one comes to think of it, John—eighteen years, 'tis a great piece out of a lifetime. Such happy years they have been! Never any sorrow coming to us but that one—our little Ruth, our one summer flower! All the other children were born in the autumn or winter, when the days were short and cold, but she came with the roses, and went away with them the very next year! God only lent her to us for a little while, but though it is so long ago, and she will not be a baby now, but a little bright angel, I shall know her again, I think, John, and perhaps she will be watching for me—for us—when we go."

"Ay, Ruthie. She was a bonny babe, the

only one of them all that had your eyes—blue, like the sky above us. It was a sore trial losing her, but it was God's will, and we tried to bear it."

" *You* did, dear. I remember how brave and patient you were, and how you comforted me when I was wicked, and thought I *could* not bear the sorrow. I've often feared that it was my fretting so over her, that made Steenie more delicate than his brothers."

" He *is* delicate, but he's a quick bright lad, and maybe he'll grow stronger. Besides, we cannot expect to see every boy so big and strong as Johnnie and Will. Good lads they are too, and we should be thankful for such children. There's that cough again. Don't talk any more, but let me read you a bit out of that book of Miss Grace's."

" Hark ! there come the children ! They are singing that new carol that Miss Grace taught them. Listen, John"—

" Sing we merry Christmas,
Christmas blithe and free ;
Time of holy gladness,
Mirth and minstrelsy.

Hark ! the merry church bells
Ringing joyously,
Hailing with sweet music
Christ's Nativity.

“ Haste we to His temple,
Wreath our garlands green,
Deck each arch and column,
Stall and altar screen.
'*Gloria in excelsis*',
Hark ! the angels sing ;
'*Gloria in supremis*
To our Infant King.' ”

How sweet and clear come the voices through
the frosty air ! But the mother—what does she
hear besides that makes her gaze upward and
listen with that intensity, as if to catch some
far-off echo of the song of praise ?

“ Ruth, darling, are you ill ? Speak to me.”

That night a trembling little messenger is at
the Hall, imploring to see Miss Grace, and an-
other is speeding on an errand of life and death
in quest of the doctor at the neighbouring town.
In vain : ere morning dawns the angel's sum-
mons has gone forth, and Ruth is with her
summer child among the roses of Paradise.

It is the evening of the Epiphany ; a solitary

man is standing beside a newly-made grave. He heeds not the increasing cold, nor the snow-flakes which fall ceaselessly around him, for beneath the turf they are whitening, lies hidden all the sunshine of his heart. Vainly the loving voices of his children have implored "father" to come home ; he must be alone with her this first day. Alone ! aye, how bitterly alone for all the long life to come. He has found two snowdrops on the sheltered bank this morning, one fully blown, the other a tiny bud ; and as he laid them on her breast before she was hidden from his sight, they seemed types of both the Ruths who were gone from him.

He cannot weep, he cannot even pray ; he can only gaze down upon the winding-sheet of snow, until the darkness has almost closed around him. Then, for one moment his eyes are raised heavenwards—myriads of stars are glittering in the deep blue vault ; but what is that one, larger and brighter than all the rest, that seems to look down upon him in its silver radiance ? It is the star of the Epiphany—the star that for eighteen years he has watched with Ruth on

this night from his cottage door. How its light seems changed ! it is as if the eyes of his wife were shining down upon him from her glorious home, and bidding him take courage. And then even as he gazes, comfort seems to enter into his soul, and the words which they both had sung on their wedding-day, and on many an Epiphany since, ring softly in his ears.

“ And when earthly things are past,
Bring our ransomed souls at last,
Where they need no star to guide,
Where no clouds Thy glory hide.”

“ At last ”—yes, “ at last; ” but for him the toil is not over, the journey but half done. Home—home once more to the children that she has left him—home for awhile to endure “ the burden and heat ” of the day—home while the pitying eye of the star still looks down upon him, until the goal shall be won and the brave spirit have earned its rest in the other Home, where wife and babe are watching for him by the golden entrance gates.

1970-1971

1970-1971

P A R T I I I.

P A R T I I I.

" He goes on Sunday to the church,
And sits among his boys ;
He hears the parson pray and preach,
He hears his daughter's voice
Singing in the village choir,
And it makes his heart rejoice.

" It sounds to him like her mother's voice
Singing in Paradise !
He needs must think of her once more,
How in the grave she lies ;
And with his hard, rough hand he wipes
A tear out of his eyes."

—LONGFELLOW.

A YEAR has passed, and once more it is Christmas-tide in Charlton-Stoke, and the bells are ringing merrily to summon the villagers to church.

It is a green yule this year, the air almost as mild as in October ; and the birds have been so well supplied with other food, that they have not robbed the holly of many of its coral treasures.

Ah ! the church-decorators have gained by this, and proudly Mary Frost describes to her

brothers the glories of the inscription which she has helped Miss Grace to put up over the west door. If this weather continues, the snowdrops on the bank will be in bloom by the Epiphany. "Mother's snowdrops" the boys still call them, and the nook where they grow is always carefully tended for her sake.

There is the blacksmith's stalwart form towering above his tall sons, just as of old, but there are many silver lines *now* in the dark locks, and the sunshiny joyous look has passed from the honest face. He looks almost an old man now, and the Christmas mirth around saddens rather than cheers his heart. But yet, for the children's sake, he tries to smile, and even to answer the friendly greetings of the neighbours as they join him on the way to church.

"O father!" cries Will, who had run on in front, "have you heard the news? Why, Mr Morgan says that the squire has come back—the squire and his lady! They came last night, and it was kept a secret, because Mrs Winthrop had been ill, and the squire wanted it to be all quiet, like. But Miss Grace knew it—and they are all to be at church to-day together."

“God bless the squire!” says John Frost’s deep voice, and there is not a heart in the village that does not echo the feeling. Yes; the long patient waiting has met its reward at last, and Edmund Winthrop has brought the love of his youth to the home where he first learned to know her worth.

A few months since, a hasty summons had called him to the bedside of Alfred Carrington. The once gay brilliant man of the world was dying—dying without a friend near him but the faithful sister who had sacrificed all for his sake. A woman of six and thirty, faded, worn, with nothing of youth remaining, she had almost reproached herself for the start and thrill she could not repress as the name of Winthrop reached her ears!

And how changed was the grave, calm, middle-aged gentleman she now saw from the impetuous youth of eighteen years ago! But he was the same Edmund still in his kindly greeting to herself, his message of love from Grace, and his gentle forbearance with the querulous invalid.

And when the brother whom she had so

blindly loved was no more—when the last words of pitying forgiveness had been spoken, and he needed their patience and their care no longer—who so fit as Edmund to comfort the sister in her loneliness? There was none to come between them now, no prior claim on Ada's heart; and thus, in the autumn of their lives, these two, whose love had endured so long, became man and wife. But Ada's health had been weakened by all she had undergone, and for many weeks after their quiet wedding, it was thought best for her to live in a foreign climate.

Grace had been left to keep house at the Hall, and to overlook the various improvements with which Edmund had thought to brighten the old place for his wife's reception.

A report got about, that, upon her brother's return, Miss Grace intended to leave the Hall, and bitter were the lamentations thereat; the villagers declaring that not even the arrival of the new Mrs Winthrop could compensate for the loss of "their own lady," bred and born as she had been among them, and beloved by every one in the parish.

But Miss Grace only smiled, and comforted

all anxious questioners by assuring them that she was not going far away—no farther than the white cottage by the hill-side, which would make her a nearer neighbour of her favourite, Mary Frost.

“O father, here they come! here’s the squire and his lady, and Miss Gracie too!” and as Steenie speaks, the party from the Hall come through the lych-gate by the great yew tree, and the squire, pausing a moment, directs his wife’s attention to the blacksmith and his children, as they enter at the opposite gate.

Then Edmund Winthrop steps forward with outstretched hand to greet his old friend. “I am glad to have met you here to-day, John. We always hoped to be home at Christmas, and to hear the bells of our dear old church. And here,” drawing his wife forward, “is a lady who has not forgotten you, or any friendly face in Charlton-Stoke. You remember her?”

The blacksmith’s face flushes to a deep red. Remember! Could he ever forget one who had once borne the name of Carrington? But the timid gentleness of Mrs Winthrop’s manner disarms him.

"I have often heard my sister speak of your daughter," she says, looking at Mary, and trying to trace some resemblance to the lovely girl who had been Grace's maid nineteen years ago.

"She says that you are her right hand amongst the choir."

Mary smiles and curtsies, and the squire speaks a kind word or two to the boys, and then turns again to their father.

"Ah, John! the days of 'Merry Christmas' seem gone by for you and me. We must leave it for such as these," smiling at the young folks. "But we may claim some share in the true spirit of Christmas yet, when we look at yonder words," he adds, pointing to the inscription in golden immortelles over the altar, which is plainly visible through the church door—

"Behold, I bring unto you glad tidings of great joy."

"Ay, sir!" and the blacksmith's head is bent low, as he follows the squire into the church, and takes his accustomed place between his boys. Mary is just beyond, in her seat at the head of the choir; and well does her father love to hear the sweet clear notes of her voice, lead-

ing the rest in the Christmas hymn. It is like her mother's in tone, although stronger and more trained. The whole congregation join in the strain of praise, and lustily the Frost lads do their best to swell the sound, but to-day their father's voice is hushed.

This first Christmas-day—the very first that he has passed without her—how hard it seems!

He is almost hidden from sight by a holly-wreathed pillar, and none but his gentle youngest boy can see that father's tears are dropping fast upon his open book! Poor Steenie is half frightened, but he will not call his brother's attention to the sight; and as the service proceeds, the soothing words find their way to the brave patient heart, and Frost is able to look up once more.

Presently the vicar (a middle-aged, bald-headed man now, but with the same kindly youthful face as ever) gives out the second Christmas hymn.

With what a burst of joy and praise it rings out!

“Hark! the herald angels sing,
Glory to the new-born King.”

Yes! the deep rich notes are not wanting now.

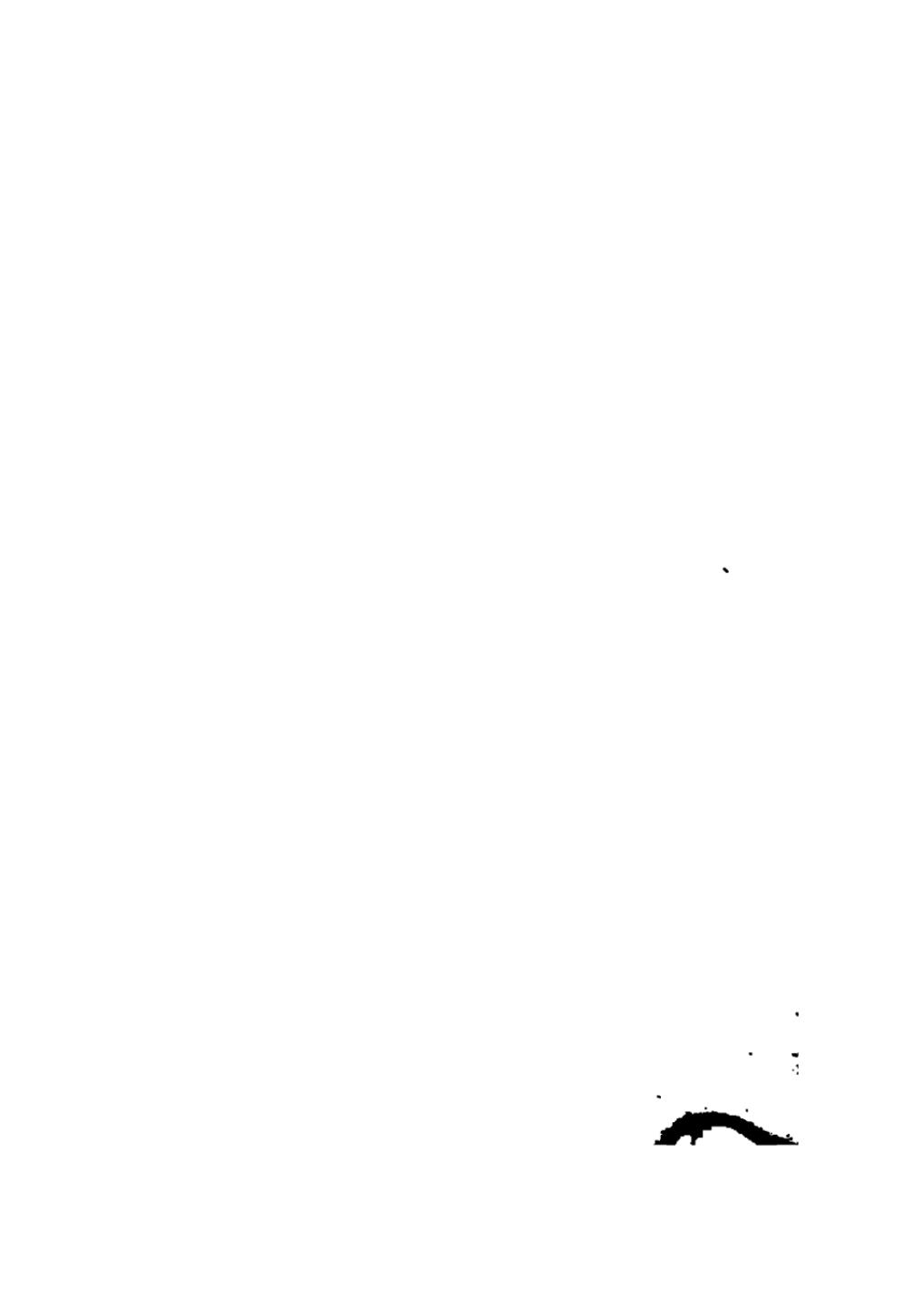
and, with a lightened heart, Mary sustains her own part, as she hears her father's voice following. It is no earthly strain in which he joins ; for far above the old vaulted church, in the boundless choir of heaven, his ear seems to catch the well-known tones, and he knows that his wife is waiting for him in the realms of eternal praise.

The service ends—he feels as if they were again parted ; but his courage endures still. It will endure, while there is need of it—while there is work on earth that God has appointed him to do.

Nor have his children reason to doubt, as they cluster round him in their homeward walk, that the squire's words are true, and though father's "merry" days are over for ever, yet he, too, has his share in the true spirit of Christmas.

"Toiling, rejoicing, sorrowing,
Onward through life he goes ;
Each morning sees some work begun—
Each evening sees it close ;
Something attempted, something done,
Has earn'd a night's repose."

—LONGFELLOW.



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